



# DRAGON BUCK

## PHASE-SHIFT 2

原案・監修: 森利道  
アーティスト: ハーフパンク  
著: 駒尾真子

ドラゴンブック

# BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Illustrations

When he regained consciousness, Jin was lying in the bed of a strange room.

"Where am I...?"

Celica's knees crumbled.

Her consciousness became distant like it was absorbed.

(No... if I faint... I can't meet... Ragna...)

"Eight, Seven..."

Nine dropped her voice in displeasure as the pair of man and woman appeared and stood in her way.



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フェイズシフト2

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監修 森利道  
著 駒尾真守  
著  
脚本監修 森利道

富士見書房

DRAGON BOOK

トヨブックス

●STEINS;GATE シュタインズ・ゲート  
円環連鎖のウロボロス①  
円環連鎖のウロボロス②  
比翼連理のアンダーリン①

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●Gideon ギデオン  
The man whom God disliked

●キャサリン  
●コープスパーティ  
Book of Shadows

●モンスター・コレクション・サモナーズ  
アルフレアの不死鳥  
ソラステルの堕天使

BLAZBLUE 3巻目おめでとうございます！！！

イラストを担当させていただきました加藤です

今回はかなり時間が厳しかったですねえー

~~ぎりぎりまで待たせてしまってすいませんでした~~

~~でもぎりぎりなのに書きこむのがやめられないんです~~

駒尾様、編集様方 ご迷惑かけましてすいませんでした

何はともあれ3巻おめでとう！



皆さんお久しぶりです、 アークシステムワークスの森です  
先ず、 この本を手にとって頂きありがとうございます。  
ここまで読んだ方はお解りだと思いますが、  
今回のフェイズシフト2は上下巻です。  
次回は・・・さてどうなるのでしょうか。  
ある意味大人気のこの二人（？）の  
活躍にご期待下さい！！  
そして、 担当者様、 加藤さん、 駒尾先生  
本当にありがとうございます！！

蒼の物語はまだ続きます。



# BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Prologue

## Prologue

The stars were lovely.

Feeling the cold lawn on his back, he muttered into the emptiness.

Even now, the stars, which appeared to be falling, kept flickering.

The sky looked deep and distant, as it always was.

It was not something that could be grasped just by reaching out your hand. Even if it had been possible, his battered body, which had been lying on top of a hill, didn't have the remaining strength to lift his arm.

His blue clothes were torn. His white cheeks and golden hair were covered in dirt. His body had already been losing its ability to function for a while. Under this moonlight, his fleeting consciousness would disappear before long.

He was sinking to his death.

Even as the stars were lovely, the moon was dazzling.

...As if it was falling down.

He hated that moon. Wanted none of its bright light, he dragged his dead arm up to cover his eyes.

Cold drops from the corner of his eyes were falling down his cheeks.

Suddenly, the wind stirred. It was only strong enough to flutter a dress, but it was enough for him to notice that someone was present.

"...Who's there?" He asked faintly.

The arm that had been covering his sight, slipped down to his chest.

A large umbrella intercepted the moonlight. The person who had been standing by his side was actually a very young girl. Luxurious black dress. Golden hair tied up to two parts. Her age seemed to be 10. ...No, she might be about 6 or 7 years old. Didn't she have an umbrella, too?

The spectacle appeared right before his eyes, yet the details were fuzzy and incomprehensible.

The only certain thing was that the girl wore big ribbons similar to a rabbit's ears. She also had red eyes.

The girl looked into the distance and whispered to no one.

"...Soon, it will be born."

It was a very ominous voice, but had a strange kind of affection in it. As if she knew that it was the beginning of something about to be born.

He understood what she said. Even when that *something* had not been explained, he knew what it was. It had to be killed by his hands no matter what.

The girl, the scent of flowers wafting around her, slowly turned her face to him. A pair of crimson eyes looked down on him. A cold gaze unlike that of a little girl's, yet similar to moonlight.

He recognized those eyes. It was in his distant memory but seemed almost as if it was yesterday. But that memory quickly disappeared, like a frozen flower broken into pieces.

"Mr. Hero."

The girl's lips teasingly spoke.

"How would you like to become a real hero?"

The wind blew through the girl's hair.

For him, it was a moment of one's end, and one's beginning.

Before long, a rumble could be heard from far away.

It gradually grew larger and more violent, shaking both the night sky and solid earth... and became a beast's roar that was thundering throughout the world.

It was a roar that made every existence shiver. The being that would be called *Black Beast*, a monster that drove the world to destruction, let out its first cry.

# **BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Chapter 1**

## **Chapter 1: White Blade, A Flower**

### **Part 1**

In the center of a dim room, a pale white light had been lit. It was a transparent sphere floating in empty space and was about the size of a human head. Rather than electrons, the borne light was made by magic utilising alchemical techniques.

The sphere, which was hanging in the air as if set on an invisible pedestal, was surrounded by five figures.

One was a petite girl wearing a full length robe. Beautiful platinum blonde hair was overflowing from the hood she wore, sparkling like sunlight as it was struck by the bland light.

Standing next to her was an even more petite silhouette. Its height was about that of a human child, but its appearance was like a bipedal cat. The tail protruding from its back was long, the odd thing was that it branched into two.

The third figure, in contrast to the other two, was a tall, middle-aged man wearing a grumpy look. He was wearing a refined attire including a high quality shirt and vest, but they couldn't hide the glimpses of the sturdy build underneath.

Standing in line with him was a tall man of a similar height, but with a far

thinner figure. Standing with both hands inserted into the pockets of his long coat, he wore a low hood that meant even his eyes were hidden in shadow.

And then giving each of them glances as they stared at the sphere, another girl stood. Long hair crossed over her waist, her skin was white enough to be called transparent. Her most obvious feature was the large triangular hat placed on her head.

Her name was Nine.

The thin man was Yuuki Terumi.

The middle-aged man was Valkenhayn R. Hellsing.

The cat with two tails was Jubei.

The platinum blonde girl was Trinity Glassfille.

They stood silently in thought while staring at the sphere. Inside it, the shifting images of the current world situations were being projected.

"...So far, the representatives of many nations which have met with catastrophe are currently taking refuge in Ishana. There are preparation to devise a plan for the cooperation of each nation, with Ishana as the focus."

In the silent room, Trinity began to talk in her slow, soft voice that was like a ripple unfolding on water. Responding to her voice, the images of those catastrophe ridden countries were floating and disappearing in turn.

Frowning with a sad expression for a moment behind those spectacles, Trinity pushed up her large round glasses up her nose a little and continued on.

"However as for the countries with relatively low damage, the nations are being cautious to ensure they participate in the efforts centered on Ishana. As yet, discussions are still ongoing and have yet to reach a conclusion as there are countries that do not deign to participate in the congress. No, if there's still no conclusion, then it's still okay but..."

"So a confrontation is growing between the countries that have representatives in Ishana and those that don't. ...Even though this isn't the situation for quarreling between mankind."

Taking over Trinity's sorrowful words, Valkenhayn spoke with a grimace.

Looking at him with his large eyes, Jubei's cat mouth snickered.

"There ain't gonna be any fair arguing. They're the lucky chaps. It's just natural."

There was a degree of discomfort in the clear male voice of the beast, but no one in the room took it to mind.

Gazing at the shining sphere, the bridge of Jubei's nose wrinkled.

"They ain't gonna understand unless they see with their own eyes. About the terror... of *The Black Beast*."

The Black Beast.

Seven years ago... between 2099 and 2100 AD, it appeared. A monster similar to a gigantic mass of shadow.

Together with the appearance of the Black Beast, the world was filled with substance called *seithr*. Guided by *seithr*, the Black Beast's destructive scars were marked all over the world starting with Japan.

Without any means to fight, humanity was driven back. In merely six years after the Black Beast's appearance, the total population of the world was decreased by half.

But last year, the last day of 2106 AD. At the very same day that marked seven years had passed since the Black Beast emerged. As quickly as the monster which terrorized the world emerged, it was suddenly gone.

"It has been eight months since the last appearance of that monster. This long absence of its activity must have dulled the nations' judgment. Among them, there are people beginning to appear who say the Black Beast is no more."

Valkenhayn lowly groaned as if to suppress his resentment.

Trinity gently pressed her chest and slightly drew her chin.

"The threat hasn't disappeared yet... Even now the *seithr* mist is still blowing throughout the world. The remnants of the Black Beast are also still threatening people..."

"Not gettin' the cooperation of the countries means the cooperation between

Ishana and United Nations ain't going well. The investigation for the missing 'Kushinada's Lynchpin' is still going on. But since the UN's planning to do it their own way, gettin' intelligence is complicated."

Jubei spoke in words mixed with sighs while the long tails on his back swayed, alert. At the same time, the floating lengthy image stirred in the sphere.

"...Eight months."

A noise from the five extending shadows resounded. A sharp, cold voice muttered. A large triangular hat stood out. It was Nine.

Staring at the sphere floating in the air, Nine folded her arms under her voluptuous chest and supported her chin with her fingers as she pondered.

She recalled a certain man. Eight months ago, they met on the day of Black Beast's last appearance and parted with him on the very same day.

The man had spoken. That the Black Beast's activities would be halted for one year.

—*One year. During that time, get the strength needed for humanity to battle the Black Beast.*

Nine remembered clearly the words she had heard eight months ago, down to his tone of voice. No, those words didn't become clearer as the days went by. Day by day... as the period where the disappearance of Black Beast continued, she realized that he spoke the truth.

There were still four months until the pronounced one year ended. If a year passed, it would likely, surely appear.

"No conventional weapons could be used against Black Beast. Even if in the future some immensely powerful weapons were made, they wouldn't hurt the Black Beast. ...Isn't that so?"

Nine's sharply pointed voice was like putting ice on the stretched string of the room's tension.

Beside the owner of the voice, stood a man. He wore a low hood that hid his expression and he hadn't opened his mouth until now. He was Yuuki Terumi.

His mouth, his only facial feature exposed by the dim light, began to speak.

"Yeah, that's right."

"With the exception of *magic*, hurting that monster requires utilizing seithr."

"Eyyup. ...Also, don't make me explain the same thing over and over. You getting senile, bitch?"

He spat out a curse since he was getting tired of it. Then Nine scowled sternly and shot him a death stare.

But she immediately shook off the fury from her gaze and turned to the other direction, her hair spinning.

"The means to attack Black Beast by utilizing seithr, *armagus*, is almost complete."

"Armagus... If I remember correctly, it could make normal people who ain't a mage able to use magic. "

"It's a little different."

Toward Jubei's admiration, Nine slightly slackened her mouth and answered.

"The fundamentals of magic and armagus are different. Magic borrows the spiritual power that's originally present in nature and then puts that to use. In regard to armagus, it's invoked by utilizing seithr. If there's no seithr, it can't be used. Since ordinary people can't handle seithr, a *grimoire* is necessary to make it feasible."

"Grimoire?"

The one who tilted her head slightly as she asked was Trinity. Nine slightly nodded.

"Although I said grimoire, it doesn't mean that's the real form. It changes the gathered seithr in the armagus, kind of like a converter. Anyway, it makes it possible for even people outside Ishana to attack the Black Beast."

Answering without pause, Nine shifted her gaze for an instant, stealing a glance of the man next to her.

The development of armagus had begun approximately half a year ago. Nine was the one who had fabricated armagus' base theory, but Terumi was

indispensable in completing it in such a short amount of time.

Terumi possessed massive knowledge regarding the Black Beast and seithr. It was because of that knowledge that establishing armagus' form was possible.

Again, Nine recalled the words of the man she had met eight months ago. He had also said something else. That she should watch out for Yuuki Terumi.

Nine had heeded those words, yet she had taken Terumi out from the deep basement of a certain castle. She also had firmly applied *Mind Eater*, a magic that made him completely unable to defy its user, controlling over his will.

"But although I said ordinary people can use it, it doesn't really mean that anyone can do it. An aptitude is required in themselves. The manufacturing of the grimoire is going well, but there's an insufficient number of people who could use it. If it remains as it is, the counter measure for Black Beast would be imperfect. If possible, it should be a powerful measure, rather than being able to exhibit strength without having to be bound with seithr. For example..."

"Like the weapons we use?"

Jubei held out a single sword on his back. The sword that came out of the dark had been given to him by Nine about one month ago.

Of course, it wasn't an ordinary sword. It was a specially made article that had alchemy and magic's techniques included in its making. Instead of clearing away a certain mass of seithr, the sharp blade could cut it up.

Similarly, Trinity also held out the specialized weapon Nine had developed. The small cane could transform by taking the nature of magic Trinity wanted to use in mind.

"Yes. But even then, they're still weak. It shouldn't be like armagus which is only a substitute for magic or those prototypes given to you guys... We require weapons that have a more specialized ability in order to defeat the Black Beast."

Nine spoke stubbornly as if burdening herself with a new task.

Toward her, a small laugh interrupted from beside her.

"Weapons... huh."

There was no wondering about the owner of the voice with the ridiculing tone. Nine looked at Terumi with cold eyes.

His slender body was turned toward the sphere floating in the room like always, but the glance that had a suggestive indication drifting about was aimed at Nine.

"You okay not telling our dear friends the details? It's looking like you're making the weapons in the dark here~ ...You hear me?"

"I don't need you to interrupt this conversation. Be quiet, Terumi."

As she spoke with a tone of voice as if holding him down, Nine hit the floor with her high heel. The rough but somehow graceful noise rang sharply around the room.

If Nine told him to be silent. Terumi would do so. Mind Eater was that kind of a magic. Terumi was silent, but he stood while still grinning like a maniac.

Drawing her gaze from the face that looked like it was holding back a burst of laughter, Nine sighed in annoyance.

As if to calm the irritated Nine, Jubei made a bitter smile. He then shrugged his small shoulders.

"So as of now, there's only one way to effectively attack Black Beast. If the weapons Nine spoke of have been completed, we'll be able stand on equal ground with that monster and challenge it."

However, that speech resulted in a new irritation for Nine.

Playing her fingers around the brim of her large triangular hat which stood as a symbol of wisdom, Nine pointed her chin toward the space between Jubei and Valkenhayn.

"...And? Where's the only person who has the means to attack Black Beast, Hakumen, gone?"

The empty spot where the harsh words were thrown to was supposed to hold a sixth person standing together with them.

## Part 2

Ishana, an island floating on ocean.

The island was painted with lush green nature and a lovely townscape. It was known as *The Mage's Guild* outside the island.

On the other side of history, the Mage's Guild had constantly influenced change in the world. The organization existed to protect and enhance alchemy and magic, the techniques that should have been forgotten in ancient times. They didn't belong to any country nor bend to anyone. At present, there was a grand academy established in the center to pass down the continuously inherited ancient wisdom and vast knowledge to the next generation.

In the academy's courtyard, she stood alone.

The raised tall trees were sparkling, bright green from the summer sunlight. Between those trees, the white sunlight filtering through and fell upon the small stone pavement that was like stitching on the ground.

Although its vicinity was encircled by buildings related to the academy and Mage's Guild, this place didn't have a very enclosed feeling at all. Rather than a courtyard within a school, it appeared more like a hidden garden.

Sitting on a deserted bench set under the shade of a tree in the corner of the garden, Celica A. Mercury was swinging her feet.

The academy uniform in shades of white and black had a magician's motif on it. The short mantle on her back was fluttering in the wind. Her thick, light brown hair that was tied in a high ponytail and the treetops of the courtyard were rustling together, making refreshing noises.

"Looks like Onee-chan isn't done yet."

There was a brick building belonging to the Mage's Guild at the end of a path close to her. There was a meeting being held inside a council room which had barrier that wouldn't let any voices or information leak out. Celica's older sister,

Nine, was participating in the meeting.

Celica was waiting for her sister and her companions to come out after the meeting ended.

The wind carrying the scent of greenery was softly blowing through.

"...It feels good."

Celica straightened her posture and lifted her head. The sunshine passed through the trees next to her before shining upon her cheeks and forehead.

Today, like always, Ishana's air was clear without any stagnation.

Seven years ago, along with the appearance of the Black Beast, seithr had overflowed throughout the world and polluted the atmosphere. It lessened the wind, weakened the waves, and made the soil barren. The seasons lost their characteristics as the weather became disturbed. The creatures that were constantly exposed to thick seithr would lose their original form and go mad, destroying everything.

However, Ishana wasn't like that. The island that was managed by magic was protected by an invisible barrier. The air, water, and soil were pure, uncontaminated by seithr.

As a matter of fact, there was an incident last year when the barrier had been damaged, resulting in seithr entering the island for a short period. But Celica didn't know much about that as the incident occurred immediately after Celica slipped out of the island on important business. When Celica returned to Ishana, the barrier had already been repaired completely.

With the infiltrating seithr purified, Ishana was now thoroughly clean without any glimpse of the incident.

Celica deeply inhaled Ishana's air into her chest.

"I wonder what his face would look like if I brought him to this island."

While narrowing her eyes to block the sunlight shining into them, she smiled gently.

What she was picturing beyond the light and green curtains was the face of a friend important to Celica.

...Friend might not be correct. To tell the truth, Celica didn't know what she should regard him as. She didn't have a formal relationship to refer him as an acquaintance, but he wasn't what she would usually call a friend either.



In just a few days, he became awfully close to her. He had helped her. He had supported her. He had protected her.

He was... such an irreplaceable person.

"Fufu, I'm sure he'd be amazed. Ah, but he might have actually seen a similar place. After all, he knew so much about magic even though he's not from this island... He's such a mysterious person."

Without realizing, she actively talked to herself in this place devoid of other people.

She met him eight months ago, during the end of last year. He was tall, had white hair and a green eye just on his left side. He was rough around the edges, but very kind.

Since they parted so suddenly he had never told her much about himself, Celica didn't get to know him well enough. But a lot of the strength he'd given her was always burning inside Celica's chest.

There was never a moment when she forgot about him. He was important, precious...

Suddenly, a light was glimmering at the edge of Celica's gaze.

It was probably the sunlight filtering through the trees. But when the light blinded Celica for an instant, her sight was completely engulfed in the next moment.

(Eh...!?)

Her shout of surprise didn't manage to escape.

As if the world had been turned inside out in the blink of an eye, Celica's surroundings turned to bright white.

The courtyard's wind and rustling branches were no more. All sound and smell disappeared, it was hard to grasp which direction was up or down. She was even uncertain as to whether gravity existed. Inside the completely white

space, only Celica remained.

No, there was something else. A mirror. When she turned her face around to look at the surroundings, the rectangular mirror had stood there unnoticed, reflecting Celica's whole body.

(Where's this? Why is a mirror here...?)

She should have been able to form the questions as words, but somehow her voice couldn't come out again. It felt like everything had been sucked up and vanished.

The bizarre thing was that she wasn't terrified.

Rather, Celica was drawn by curiosity and took a step toward the mirror.

On the other side of the mirror that looked as if it had made a rectangular cut across the room, Celica's amazed figure was reflected. Then she unconsciously tried to touch it.

But just before Celica's fingers touched the mirror, suddenly it felt like she was smelling something.

It wasn't so much a smell as a familiar sensation.

It was more similar to the warmth of family sat around the table with her, or the calmness she felt when passing time alone, absentmindedly at her favorite spot.

A burning feeling in her chest that spontaneously bubbled up when she was with someone special.

Celica knew this feeling. She remembered.

Celica gently caught her breath as if waking up from a dream.

That moment, a gust of wind swept away the mist in the world. Quite naturally, the scenery returned.

The pouring sunlight filtering through trees, branches rustling in the wind, the fresh and earthy smell of midsummer. The feel of the bench placed under the

shade of a tree in the courtyard of the academy she commuted to everyday.

Without looking at them, Celica stood up while looking around. After that, she began to run.

She returned to the school building after leaving the academy's courtyard. Then she left the school proper, leaving the academy behind her. As if drawn by an invisible thread, Celica hastened her pace without so much as a look over her shoulder.

Her chest throbbed. She herself understood what she was expecting.

After all, this impression was... his.

As though she was being guided by something, she went up the slope beside the academy before going around it to a hill located at the back. She reaced her destination in no time at all. At least, Celica felt only a few seconds had passed.

There was a little surprise in the corner of her mind that the hill was so close to the school's courtyard. It would usually take much more time.

She ran up to a gentle slope that was covered with grass.

The hill was slightly elevated; it was possible to see all of Ishana's townscape. White clouds, separating the sky from the sea, were floating in the distant blue sky.

Someone was stood at the hill's summit.

The street, sea, clouds and city. With the scenery of Ishana's calm afternoon at her back, Celica shouted with all her might.

His name.

"———RAGNA!"

The first time she saw him was at the entrance of a deserted village inside a forest.

Sat leaning against the trunk of a tree, he had been gravely injured. On top of that, he had lost his memories. At first he could remember nothing but his own name.

Together with him, Celica traveled to Japan... and encountered the Black Beast.

Celica couldn't do anything. She couldn't stop him. He had directly challenged the Black Beast, and then disappeared along with it.

He had said the he would return.

He had promised.

So Celica waited. She kept waiting because she wanted to meet him again.

Responding to Celica's voice, the shadow standing atop the hill turned around slowly.

A gust of wind whirled past, disturbing the lawn, flowing through her. Celica endured the wind, slightly buffeted by it, holding her disheveled hair while raising her face.

"Ah..."

After she observed the figure once more, Celica involuntarily raised her voice.

The figure was a tall man whose silver hair fluttered in Ishana's clear wind.

However even though his figure resembled a human, it also looked odd.

His body was wrapped in white and black with something that might as easily have been clothes or armor as it could have been skin. The eyeless, earless, and mouthless face was concealed with pure white mask. Red orbs had been embedded around his body. The orbs might be the substitute for his barren face as every single one of them stared at her like eyes.

On his back, there was a long sword sheathed diagonally that was probably as long as he was tall.

"Hakumen-san..."

Celica awkwardly called out the strange man again. A slight disappointment seeped in her voice.

Hakumen was Celica's acquaintance. Together with her sister Nine and her close friend Trinity, he was one of the warriors who had gathered in Ishana in order to defeat the Black Beast.

The eyeless face and countless red orbs gazed at Celica indifferently.

"...So it is you, Celica A. Mercury."

What was heard from behind the white mask was a low tone of voice that concealed his emotions.

To cover her slip up for mistaking him for another person, Celica scratched her face and laughed.

"I'm sorry for shouting at you so suddenly. Umm... I thought you were one of my friends."

After bowing slightly, Celica soon took several steps toward Hakumen.

Hakumen just looked at her from the edge of his vision. Then just as he had been before Celica addressed him, Hakumen turned around to face the townscape.

Celica stood next to him.

"Are you observing Ishana?"

From on top of the hill, one could look down on Ishana with ease.

Basked in the gentle midday's sunlight, the green and blue roofs, and the white walls supporting them, shone brightly. There were people living on the island going back and forth on the gentle stone-paved pathways. A thin forest surrounded it as if protecting against the outside world. Furthermore, the forest was also encircled by a vast sea.

Looking at Ishana from here truly made it look just like a painting.

The scent of grass riding on the fresh wind floated past. While tucking her wind tousled hair behind her ears, Celica gazed at the city and smiled.

"This place is nice, isn't it? I come here from time to time. Though sometimes I get surprised by the sudden strong wind."

Hakumen didn't reply, choosing to remain silent.

There was a weighty feeling about the suffocating silence, but Celica didn't pay it any heed even for a bit.

They didn't often talk, but Hakumen was always like this. Basically, he would just respond to unnecessary talk with silence. He would only speak if it was about the Black Beast.

Celica raised her chin and looked up at Hakumen. He was fairly tall compared to Celica. Looking at him for a long time would make her neck sore.

The white mask must have noticed Celica's gaze, but he didn't turn his face. He faced Ishana in silence as though he was a decoration.

"But... it's strange."

The lawn rustled by wind urged Celica to continue her muttering.

"Why did I mistake Hakumen-san for him? Your appearance and atmosphere are completely different."

But there was something similar. She wondered what it could be.

She would have a bit of trouble answering if she were asked what that was. The voice, demeanor, and body language were different. The resemblance was more obscure, an awfully subjective one.

If she really tried to put it into words... it was his scent, possibly his warmth.

If she said that, even Hakumen might laugh at her thinking she was a dog or something. Celica had never witnessed him laughing. Surely no one else ever had.

Immediately imagining it, he surely would look clumsy. Celica spontaneously giggled at that thought.

As if responding to her voice, Hakumen made a slight motion as he turned his neck. The white mask was looking at Celica.

"—Ragna."

The muffled voice resounded in a low tone.

Celica stared in wonder.

He repeated the name Celica had mistakenly called him. He had only spoke, and yet it sounded like there was a hidden emotion in the name he muttered that didn't suit the expressionless swordsman.

Fixing the angle of his head toward Celica, Hakumen asked assertively.

"I've heard you say the name before. Did you mean *Ragna the Bloodedge*?"

"Bloodedge...? Nope. I only know him as *Ragna*."

"Nevertheless... You did meet a man called *Ragna*, didn't you?"

"Yup, I met him. I don't know if he's the same person you're thinking about, but he's tall and has white hair. It seems he could only see with his left eye, but his eye color was clear green."

Mixed with the gentle wind that flowed, she could hear that Hakumen inhale slightly.

Celica reflexively opened her eyes wide. It was the first time she had seen Hakumen astonished.

"Perhaps *Ragna* is your acquaintance?"

Pressing her inquiry, Celica watched for Hakumen's reaction, deeply focusing on his white mask.

But without saying anything, Hakumen averted his face from her. He once again faced the city, remaining silent. Viewing his face from the side, it seemed he refused to give an answer.

Celica had a slight wry smile. This behavior was more what she was used to.

But since he didn't leave, perhaps it meant that there was no problem in her continuing to talk. Since he indicated no readiness to reply, Celica continued on her own.

"By the way, I came here since I felt that *Ragna* was here. Since I can't sense people's power like Onee-chan can, I wonder what's actually happening... I suddenly felt a warmth like the feeling that *Ragna* had."

Celica gently put her hands on her chest. The feeling she sensed back at the courtyard was still lingering there. With just that small feeling, faint happiness soaked in her whole body. It made Celica spontaneously smile broadly.

"Since Ragna always kept his chin up at all times, doesn't that mean he's the sort of person who always looks forward? No matter how strong the wind was blowing, his feet stayed firm and wouldn't move even a step. That's my image of him. That's why just thinking that I'm next to him makes me feel like I'm being protected."

After her short speech, Celica gave a small laugh. Her ponytail drawing an arc, she looked up at Hakumen.

"Oh, what am I saying? I'm the only one who thinks about him. He actually did protect me once, too. I wonder if the Ragna you know is someone different."

If possible, she wanted to hear what Hakumen thought of Ragna.

However, she didn't sense anything from Hakumen besides his slight breathing. He was absolutely still as if he were a sculpture erected on top of the hill. On the contrary, his long silver hair, which was waving slightly as it was blown by the wind, looked out of place.

"Hakumen-san?"

She asked again to be sure. But the response was still obstinate silence.

Celica suddenly noticed. Hakumen was no longer looking at the city.

His face was facing the beautiful cityscape, but his chin was retracted. His appearance was that of a man sequestered in deep, deep thought.

## Part 3

The noise of the wind and the voice of Celica who was speaking right beside him didn't reach Hakumen.

His hearing only picked up the one name that had been mentioned several times. It made a ripple on the surface of the water of his thoughts.

Ragna.

Ragna the Bloodedge.

It was a name that couldn't be forgotten even if he tried to. A name that had been etched on the basis of his memory.

If he had the face of a human and eyes at the appropriate place, Hakumen would have frowned.

(Why... Why was Nii-san here? In this age...?)

The man he had once called brother. Ragna the Bloodedge.

In this time, he definitely shouldn't exist.

—It was the time when Hakumen was not *Hakumen*. Perhaps his last consecutive memory.

The last memory of the time when he was once named *Jin*.

The recollection began with scorching red.

Whirling flames, surging heat. Although he was showered by the scattering spray of lava, they oddly weren't hot.

In a place deep underground where an artificial volcano named *The Cauldron* was created, he—Jin threw himself into said Cauldron. For the sake of saving a person who had fallen.

"NII-SAN!"

With his beautiful golden hair disheveled, with his jade eyes burning in flames, his voice broke as he shouted. Pushing his way through the heat, he extended his arm.

There were silhouettes ahead of him in the direction he sought. The body of a large man and one of a small woman. The two of them were lying on top of another as if caught in an embrace. They were connected by a huge sword, piercing their bodies like a giant stake. Similar to a gliding bird, they went into freefall.

Jin wanted to stop the man. But his voice was swallowed by the roaring wind and his flailing arm couldn't reach him.

The woman was smiling. That woman had snatched the man Jin called brother.

He wasn't close enough that she could see him, yet her red eyes were glaring and looking up at Jin. Her face twisted into something hideous while letting out a shrill laugh. The deafening voice echoed inside his skull.

Shut up. Stop laughing.

Jin cried as he was engulfed in roaring wind and flame. Hatred and murderous thoughts gushed up from the bottom of his stomach.

"I will never... ever forgive you! NEVER!"

The apparently endless fall suddenly transformed.

The figures that were solid until then melted and blended into one. The man and woman who were united by a sword lost their features and transformed into a black, writhing mass. Gradually swelling, it expanded and swallowed the surroundings. Inside the darkness, bright red eyes that shone in a sinister fashion could be seen.

As soon as he saw it, a needle of ice penetrated Jin's spine.

At the same time, countless words of denial rushed through his mind.

*Inexcusable.*

*It mustn't be allowed to exist. It mustn't be deemed to exist.*

The denials were the impulse of his instinct. In the accumulation of them, his will and ego were crushed to nothingness.

In the end, the mass that contained his brother and the hated woman tried to

take the shape of something...

Jin, together with the black mass, fell down into the blazing flames.

Lured by the cold wind, he opened his eyes. There were no flames nor heat... What appeared before his eyes was the stretched, emotionless sky full of stars.

The figure of his brother was nowhere to be seen.

The same for the red-eyed woman, and the black mass he had seen.

But there stood a girl beside him. A girl that resembled the moon.

"Mr. Hero. How would you like to become a real hero?"

Jin didn't know how to answer the enigmatic question. He couldn't recall the correct words.

But when the girl expressed a bewitching smile that didn't seem to match her girlish appearance at all, she summoned a suffocating scent of roses and whisked Jin away from that place.

Teleportation—.

The moment he felt it, Jin lost consciousness once more.

When he regained consciousness again, Jin was lying in the bed of a strange room.

In the forefront of his vision was a dull colored ceiling, harmonized by a chandelier that seemingly had a flower and ivy motif.

The room was spacious. It was furnished with moderately luxurious but good quality furniture. The faint scent must have been roses. The bedding was also considerably first-rate, it bore the illusion that one would sink if they were to lie there for too long.

The air fluctuated suddenly.

Along with the sound of a door opening, someone entered. There was only one set of footsteps. Slipping through the door, a quiet wind and rose fragrance entered the room.

The footsteps stopped beside Jin along with the sound of wheels turning. After a short pause, a hoarse voice spoke gently.

"It seems you have awakened."

Barely hearing it, Jin tried to move his neck. He found he could only look around by moving his eyes.

There was the figure of an old man beside the bed. A wrinkled face with a long white beard, and lengthy grey hair in addition.

The old man was severely thin and looked very tired. His neck and arms looked like dead branches and his cheeks held the moss. That said, the old man was wrapped in noble attire that was breathtaking.

He was sitting in a wheelchair. The sound of wheels Jin's ears picked up earlier must have belonged to it.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Clavis Alucard. This man is my butler, Valkenhayn R. Hellsing."

A voice that shook the air gently, like a ripple on the surface of water.

With red eyes filled with the accumulated wisdom and dignity of many generations, Clavis hinted toward the restrained, well built man stood behind him.

After that, he proceeded to reach out his hand to a tiny silhouette at his side.

"This child is Rachel Alucard. ...She is the one who brought you to this castle."

Clavis put his hand on the shoulder of the girl. It was the bewitching girl who had smiled before Jin lost consciousness, below the starry sky and annoyingly dazzling moon.

But something was different. Jin thought instinctively.

It could be the appearance, the age, or even her very existence. He was certain that she was the girl from that time, but he had a feeling that something

was fundamentally different.

Jin gathered a little strength and knitted his brows.

It wasn't just the girl. This place was anomalous. These people, the drifting air... even the flow of time.

"Where am I...?"

Placing his jarring arms to each side of his body, Jin tried to get up. However, even though his arms were moving, they slipped, unable to achieve any power as if they were hollow pipes.

It wasn't just his arms. It was like his whole body had been replaced with wooden doll. He even had to muster his whole strength just to move his lips.

Toward the appalled Jin, the gentle voice spoke again.

"You ought not do anything excessive. Let alone getting up, your body cannot move as you please. It is quite amazing just for you to have woken up in this short period of time."

"Short period of time?"

"It should be seven days in human time... When you were carried to this castle, you were gravely injured. The external wounds were treated by Valkenhayn, but you slipped into a comatose state due to your injuries."

After speaking that much, Clavis smiled and looked at Jin with eyes like he was admiring a kitten taking its first steps.

"Do not force yourself. Try not to get up."

He lectured Jin once again.

For a moment, a glint of clear irritation passed over Jin. But looking at Clavis' peaceful gaze made his body lose its strength. Jin sank into his bed as if giving up. His fatigue and dizziness gave him the impression that it would be futile even if he struggled.

After being certain he had relaxed, Clavis answered Jin's first question.

"This place is my castle. It does not belong anywhere in the world. It is also connected to every dark night of the world... A place that exists but is also

nonexistent. Similar to the other side of the moon."

The words he spoke were too obscure even for a fairy tale. But mysteriously they managed to sound logical for human interpretation.

At the very least, Jin had a vague understanding of it. Taking a deep breath, he spoke his next question.

"...Why am I here?"

"Well, then. I do not know the details either. But young man, it appears that you have crossed the Boundary. The remaining damage to your flesh are all the result of crossing over it."

"Boundary..."

Just what is the Boundary? It seemed to be a word he should have known, but Jin didn't understand much about it for some reason. No, that was incorrect. He knew the 'information' regarding the meaning of the word Boundary. How could he know about it? Where did he obtain that knowledge?

In the first place, just who was he? Clavis said that he arrived here after passing through the Boundary. But where was he and what was he doing before then? ...He didn't know.

His mind was blurry. He wanted to put his hand on his forehead, but the hand wouldn't move.

He heard a sympathetic sigh from Clavis.

"Are your memories in chaos? Perhaps that is also because you have been heavily affected by the Boundary. There is an enormous amount of information drifting in the Boundary. When your spirit connected with it, your individual memories as well as personality were swept away by the excessive knowledge. To put it simply, you cannot remember yourself well enough."

With the noise of clothes rustling, Clavis lightly moved his hands from the wheelchair's handles onto his knees.

Looking away from the sluggish gesture, Jin turned his gaze toward the ceiling. The light of the chandelier was awfully distant. It made it feel lifeless.

Clavis' drowsy voice continued.

"Crossing the Boundary is very dangerous. It is a wonder for an ordinary man to even retain his flesh. Even if it remained, one would lose himself as his will became engulfed by the Boundary. ...It appears that you possess a very strong spirit."

Strong spirit. Those words were oddly amusing. Jin spat it out by taking a breath.

If he truly possessed that thing, then —— wouldn't be ——.

(...Who... What was it?)

The floating thought dispersed at once before it formed a shape inside his mind. He couldn't grasp it. It was just he felt that he had lost something... Something that absolutely mustn't be lost.

His head was heavy. He spontaneously closed his eyelids. With his vision shut in the dark, a spectacle was resurrected as if it had been waiting patiently.

Red flames, burning air, falling figures... and then red eyes.

For the present Jin, it was his last and only clear memories.

"Black... I saw a black mass. Where is that thing?"

That's right, a black mass. At the same time as he remembered, the emotions he had when he witnessed it were overflowing, gushing forth anew.

*That being shouldn't be allowed to exist.*

Jin's spine was shivering as his memories, along with thought, got swept away. Even his ego was engulfed by the impulse. It wasn't because of terror. If he put it into words then it would be murderous intent.

"That being is the Black Beast... It materialized from the Boundary. A being that is destroying the world."

Clavis' voice gently wrapped up the burning negative feelings.

"It seems it appeared in this world one month ago. After singlehandedly forcing a small island country into catastrophe, it presently rampages around the world searching for further destruction."

"It must..."

Slipping from his thoughts, Jin's mouth moved on its own and spoke. The words didn't completely sound; they didn't even reach Jin's ears himself. But as for the meaning of the enveloping emotions, it was too obvious not only to Jin, but also Clavis.

*It must be killed.*

Jin clenched his teeth. His molars grating against one another made a noise. The inner corner of his eyes were burning.

It was terribly confusing. Merely yielding to that confusion made the desire to immediately rush away from this place rampage inside his body.

He himself didn't have any kind of intention, but he felt bad as if his body was taking control and doing as it pleased.

His head aching, Jin grimaced severely.

Watching the situation quietly, Clavis continued to speak.

"Young man. This is still the time for you to recuperate. If you take a rest for a little bit more, you will be able to get up. Perhaps some of your memories will also return. If the time comes, if you still have the will to stand... there is a place I intend to show you."

"What...?"

"Until then, please rest to your heart's content. The reason you're here is because your destiny has not yet concluded."

After he said that, Clavis casted his gaze to the silent Valkenhayn at his back as if urging him.

Still with a gloomy expression, Valkenhayn handled the wheelchair with a delicate manner that didn't suit his build and left the room with Clavis.

The girl who was following, Rachel, silently halted her feet in front of the door for a moment. With the ribbons in her long golden hair swinging, she looked back at Jin.

The big red eyes of a doll were staring at Jin.

But without saying anything, the girl's eyes continued to gleam with that cold

color. Then a wind blew unexpectedly and in a flash the girl vanished to the hallway.

With the door closed the room was peacefully silent.

Jin glared at the solid wood of the door from his bed.

*I couldn't—.*

The broken thought came in contact with the broken memories, revealing a whisper of regret.

*Your destiny has not yet concluded.*

Clavis' words echoed deep within his chest. Feeling annoyed by it, Jin fell asleep before long as if fainting.

"...n. Hakumen-san!"

What had pulled up Hakumen from sinking endlessly into the lake of thought might be the voice of the girl who seemed to repeatedly calling to him while lightly hitting his arm, or perhaps it was the chimes of a bell sounding that the time was 3 o'clock before vanishing as if absorbed by the distant sky.

While his five senses were readjusting to the here and now, Hakumen turned his face toward the worried girl stood next to him who was looking up at him.

As he moved, Celica sigh a breath of relief and smiled.

"Thank god. I thought something was wrong since you were completely still."

After she said that, she noticed that she was still touching his arm. Then Celica retracted her hand behind her back while making a mischievous face.

Not minding it, Hakumen turned his head. What the white mask was seeing was the Mage's Guild that was located at the center of Ishana's townscape.

"...It seems to have ended."

Lowly murmuring, he turned on his heels with the long silver hair on his head

fluttering. Each time he stepped forward, the lush lawn made a noise.

Before he went too far, Celica immediately chased after him.

"Wha, wait up. You're going to Onee-chan's place, right? I'll go with you!"

Hakumen didn't give a reply, but he slightly shortened his large steps.

Stepping after him, Celica jogged to catch up with a light trot.

As if urging both of their shadows to leave the hill, a strong gust of wind blew through.

# BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Chapter 2

## Chapter 2: Purple Ones, Their Theory

### Part 1

Most of the children who lived in Ishana attended an academy located at the centre of the city. It was adjoined with the Mage's Guild.

The U-shaped buildings were built facing each other. There was a thick green garden of a courtyard interposing, connecting the two establishments. It was possible to go back and forth there.

Even if she had a day off from the academy, whenever she had business with Mage's Guild, Celica always entered through the academy's main gate. But since the circumstance was quite different today, she entered using the gate to the Mage's Guild.

The reason was her companion. Her companion wore a faceless white mask and odd white clothing. He, Hakumen, was also outfitted with a long sword that was as long as he was tall. Since she was taking him along, she couldn't go inside the academy as her classmates might be there.

To quickly avoid any unnecessary stiff atmosphere, she started to run toward the courtyard that was also connected with the academy.

When she got outside, the smell of nature hit her all at once. The refreshing wind made Celica stop walking reflexively and took a deep breath of air.

Then, some familiar figures caught her eye.

On the other side of the shrubberies she could see several men and women walking.

When she noticed the woman wearing a large triangular hat walking at the front of the pack, Celica's face suddenly lit up.

"Onee-chan!"

While frantically waving her hand, she sprang into a run.

She proceeded, taking a large detour around the shrubberies. The owner of the triangular hat spread both of her arms, waiting for Celica on the other side.

The woman's long hair flowed down her back, and her supple legs stretched out from her tight skirt. She was a girl with glamorous proportions that would easily charm any man without trying. She was Nine.

"Celica!"

She firmly seized the rushing Celica in both arms. Then Nine embraced her younger sister into her voluptuous chest. At the moment, most of Celica's face was buried in the soft cushion.

"Puh. Onee-chan, I'm in pain..."

"Good grief, where did you go? I was worried when I couldn't find you. I thought I told you to wait for me while I was condcting business. Are you okay? You didn't meet some vulgar man, did you?"

"Mmmmmph~~~~~..."

"Hahaha, you're at it again."

The three men and the woman who had accompanied Nine came along. Among them was a cat-type beastkin, recognisable by his high-set triangular ears and two long tails. His right eye was covered with an eye patch. The beastkin, Jubei, let out a cheerful laugh.

Together with him was Valkenhayn, a man with a fearless face and sturdy body who kept his identity as a werewolf hidden. Next was Yuuki Terumi, a man whose eyes were hidden by a hood; he was silently keeping his distance from

Celica and Nine. Behind him was a girl in a full-length robe who was wearing round glasses, Trinity.

Peeking at Celica and Nine from the side, Trinity quietly giggled.

"Oh my, Nine. Celica-san's going to cease functioning."

The cotton candy-like platinum blonde hair spilled from the hood she wore. Each time she moved, it sparkled as it reflected sunlight.

The sweet voice sounded slow and carefree. Lectured by it, Nine finally relaxed her arms.

Like a small animal, Celica slipped through the opened gap.

"Puhaa. Sorry, Onee-chan. I was with Hakumen-san up on the hill."

"With Hakumen?"

"Yup. We talked for a bit."

"...I see."

Nine, who had been looking at Celica affectionately, suddenly shifted her gaze to a completely different look. Although she had been calmly watching Celica in fascination, her stare was now like an ice needle.

Not a speck of kindness remained in her sharp gaze. The daggers in her eyes were pointed at Hakumen where he stood behind Celica, acting like he had nothing to do with her.

"The schedule of the meeting must have been reported to you, Hakumen. If you're in Ishana, then why didn't you attend?"

Nine spoke as if interrogating him. A tension began to stretch over the group.

But Hakumen didn't respond or even move.

His attitude made Nine's irritation take a sudden turn. Everyone there felt it, excluding Hakumen.

Celica's smile stiffened as she looked at Nine and Hakumen alternately. A bit to the side, Jubei and Valkenhayn looked astonished and exchanged worried looks.

High heels roughly clattering against the stone-paved path, Nine took several steps forward.

"You're the key piece in our strategy. If you're not there, then it's out of the question. Even someone like you, who can't comprehend anything other than swinging a sword, should have understood."

"I do not recall ever being your pawn."

Without making any movement, Hakumen replied indifferently.

The fire in Nine's eyes burned brighter.

"You're less than a pawn if you can't even abide simple instructions. Listen. Next time, you absolutely have to come here at the designated time. Don't keep doing the same thing every time. I don't have the spare time to babysit you."

"There is no meaning in attending a gathering with nothing but tedious talk. My soul yearns only to slay my foes."

"You may be okay with that, but it puts me in serious troubles!"

"Now, now. Don't raise your voice like that~. Look, Nine. Celica-san is frightened."

Before anyone had noticed, Trinity had moved near Nine and Hakumen. She gently forced herself between them. Before, the place was filled with a tension that could freeze the wind. That moment, the original calmness of the courtyard, matching the touch of the warm sunlight, returned.

Nine reluctantly stopped venting her anger. Seeing this, Celica felt relieved. She scratched her cheek apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I was the one who kept Hakumen-san. If only we had intended to head for the meeting instead..."

"Celica didn't do anything bad. You never intended to attend the meeting. Rather than for the meeting, you should be apologizing for making my cute Celica look sad. Like, right this instant."

"O, Onee-chan..."

Out of character for her normal professional attitude, Nine kept spoke using

the pampering voice only those closest to her knew.

Even if she had grown accustomed since Nine always did it, Celica let out a wry smile. She was happy of her sister's excessive love. But she was also worried when it occasionally went on a rampage.

"Geez... What noisy sisters."

Valkenhayn looked astonished as he turned his head toward the voice.

As if reapplying tension that had slackened off once, a harsh laughter could be heard.

It was Terumi.

He was standing casually with both hands inserted into pockets in an unambitious manner. Then he tilted his head back while his thin shoulders shook in extreme amusement. He didn't even try to hide the laugh that he ridiculed them with. He didn't think the sisters' conversation was charming even for a bit.

"Something amusing? ...You puppet."

Revealing her discomfort, Nine coldly questioned him. The degree of coldness was different from what she had been directing at Hakumen.

But instead of backing down even a little, Terumi shrugged his shoulders and continued to ridicule her.

"Nuh-uh~. It's just funny seeing you guys making idiotic faces."

Interrupting Terumi's laugh, a white arm extended toward his throat and roughly grasped his collar.

Hakumen pulled Terumi toward himself and stared at him with intimidating silence. Terumi glared at him like a venomous snake creeping out from darkness.

"What... Don't just casually touch me. I said something that hurt your feelings? Aah? Man, you just have to answer honestly."

The white mask remained silent. But the hand that grabbed his collar wasn't gentle; it was wrenched violently.

Although he was trying to tear off the arm, Terumi grinned and provoked him even more.

"Hah, what's with you? We're friends, aren't we? Let's get along, Hakumen-chan. Or what? You can't talk since you got no mouth?"

"You..."

"Okay, stop!"

Celica's voice suddenly cut in, interrupting Hakumen's words and freezing Terumi's grin.

"Quit with the fighting. You're getting into another argument so soon, even though Trinity-san just ended the last one?"

"Good grief," said Celica as she grabbed both tall men's shoulders, urging them to separate.

But before he could be pushed aside, Terumi twisted his body forcefully to get away from Celica and Hakumen's grasps. He turned his face away and faintly clicked his tongue while backing away, moving a great distance from them.

He was obviously avoiding them. But even if she was aware of it, Celica just held herself back and made a wry smile for a moment.

Every time Terumi happened to be near Nine and Hakumen, a quarrel would develop. Terumi's reaction was always the same. For some reason, Terumi had a weird dislike of being touched by Celica.

Then Trinity clasped her hands together delightfully. She made a peaceful and earnest smile.

"Everyone~, why don't we have a tea now?"

The voice that had the sweet scent of butter and sugar drifting about made Jubei scratch his head with a puzzled face.

"Tea, huh... Just like you to propose that, Trinity, but we're doin' it with these guys? It ain't like we're just goin' to fill a table and get along now, is it?"

"Isn't it fine? I'm hoping we can spend time quietly together taking a graceful tea."

While fixing his collar, Valkenhayn took a step ahead. Following him, Trinity urged the others on.

"...I sure hope the coffee will taste good."

Nine grumbled dejectedly, dropping her shoulders along with a sigh. Celica hugged Nine's arm to her chest and smiled gleefully.

"This is the first time everyone will be having tea together, right? We've got quite a number here, but let's just go to the usual shop!"

"Celica, are you serious? I don't want to see these guys' faces in that store... Ah, of course Jubei's a different case."

"H-Hey. Stop talkin' like that in a place like this..."

Jubei looked downward as Nine made a surprise attack with her charming smile. His ears which usually stood straight up were also seemingly bending down.

Nine, Celica, and Jubei followed Valkenhayn and Trinity who had gone ahead. Hakumen and Terumi also stepped forth without saying anything.

However, before they could go any further, a heavy noise resounded as the gate that led to the courtyard from Mage's Guild opened.

"Oh my~, everyone's present."

Together with the charming provocative voice, long boots' heels, which were even taller than Nine's, clacked along the courtyard's path.

The woman entering the courtyard was wearing a dress that had a large gap at the torso, complete with long mantle decorated with extravagant fur. Her lips, thick with lipstick, and the gorgeous necklace decorating her chest were eye-catching. Her suggestive attire hinted at a slender, well kept figure.

Beside her stood a man with silk-like blonde hair that had been grown long. With such a truly stylish outfit, he looked like some kind of royalty.

"It is not admirable of you bringing outsiders inside the guild, Nine."

The blond man put out a modest smile along with calm tone of voice that had thorns of rationality in it. The cool ice-blue pair of eyes looked at the lined up

faces in the courtyard in turn. The thin frame of his glasses emphasized his intelligence and dignity.

"Eight, Seven..."

Nine dropped her voice in displeasure at the pair who were now standing in her way.

Eight was the eighth and Seven was the seventh.

Along with Nine as the ninth, they were Sages just like her. The proof was the conspicuously large triangular hats placed atop their heads.

The Ten Sages—the honored people were outstanding magicians even among the Mage's Guild. They held the positions of highest authority over Ishana. The maximum number had been decided as ten people. But it was less than ten people right now. There were missing numbers as some positions in the Mage's Guild weren't filled.

Seven, Eight, and Nine's ages were relatively young among the Ten Sages. The three of them also stood out in their abilities. But it was a well-known fact that Nine was especially young and blessed with a special talent.

"Trinity. Sorry but go ahead and take Celica and the others."

Without taking her eyes from the two Sages who stood on her way, Nine spoke in a terribly calm voice.

Trinity nodded quickly.

"Understood. Everyone, let us go~."

"Is everything alright?"

Jubei was giving a concerned frown, but Trinity smiled to assuage his fear. Then she dropped her voice a little as she whispered into his ear.

"It's okay. It'll be inconvenient if we have to leave the island for carelessly meddling in the Ten Sages' affairs~. Other than matters regarding the Black Beast, getting too deeply involved with Mage's Guild would put us into trouble."

"I see..."

He was still not yet fully convinced, but Jubei swung his tails in the stead of

nodding. The only people who had as much interest in the Mage's Guild and Nine as Jubei did were Celica and Trinity. Without needing to be urged by Trinity again, Valkenhayn, Hakumen, and Terumi promptly exited the courtyard.

Afterwards, Jubei, Trinity, and Celica followed. ...But as Celica passed Seven, he grabbed her arm.

"Hey!"

Nine shouted in anger. On the spur of the moment, Trinity stopped walking and Jubei put himself on guard.

But Seven didn't release any strength from the grip that held Celica.

Celica stared at Seven in wonder. It wasn't like she knew him well, but Seven was someone who gave the impression of a gentleman with a polite demeanor and gentle attitude. It was surprising for him to rudely seize someone's arm while displaying such an awfully stern face.

Still grabbing Celica's arm, Seven loudly spoke.

"You have an involvement in our discussion. You will have to remain here."

"Me...?"

"Listen to me. Just go, Celica."

Unable to just watch, Nine stepped up and roughly separated Seven's hand from Celica's arm. Since she took the opportunity to let a light electric current flow, Seven of course removed his hand.

But from the side, Eight interrupted with frivolous talk while fiddling with her hair which was spilling from under her hat.

"Hmm? Why are you keeping your sister away? Don't you feel sorry for hiding such an important thing from her?"

"Eight, you have nothing to do with this."

"Oh, but I do. Right, Celica-chan?"

While replying with a carefree attitude toward the furious Nine, Eight looked at Celica.

Celica got the feeling from Eight's suggestive look that Nine knew something

that Celica wasn't aware of. Now, she was desperately trying to keep Celica away from it.

Once she thought about it, she couldn't keep quiet anymore.

"I will stay. Trinity-san, Jubei-san, you two can go ahead."

"Eh, eh, but..."

At Celica's flat declaration, which showed no hint of hesitation, Trinity got flustered and then looked to Nine. Without saying anything, her gentle green eyes conveyed her uncertainty.

Nine held her head. Nine knew Celica's personality better than anyone. When Celica looked up straight and spoke frankly like now, it would be futile for anyone to oppose her.

"...Trinity, Jubei. Celica and I will join you soon, so please take care of the others. Leaving them on their own will just give me endless anxiety."

"If you say so... then okay."

"We'll wait at the shop. Come quick."

Trinity bowed to Seven and Eight. Jubei didn't bow but shot them a suspicious glance. Together they turned and left the courtyard.

When the gate to the Mage's Guild's buildings had completely closed, Nine moved next to Celica. She pushed her long hair onto her back, still visibly irritated. After she spat out a sigh, her resentful gaze became filled with an unshakeable composure.

"Now, I'll listen to your business. Though, I never thought this story of yours would be anything of interest."

## Part 2

Nine with Celica, and Seven with Eight. The cold wind in the courtyard blew through the gap between them as they stood facing each other.

Nine stood with her arms folded in a manner that suited her overbearing beauty. Next to her older sister, Celica was alarmed as the tension grew more violent bit by bit.

She normally paid it no heed, but Nine, who had received a large triangular hat, was a Sage. And Seven, together with Eight, wore the same hat, signifying that they were also Sages.

The Ten Sages had a completely different status within the Mage's Guild's members. Their positions were far higher. Even the thickheaded Celica could recognize their heightened status and other social standings. The three of them stood in the same position as the people who had the highest authority in the guild. It felt like they were sticking out like a sore thumb somewhat.

Celica was restless and kept checking the surroundings. Despite this, Eight looked toward the gate that led to the guild before cynically raising her lipstick-red lips and flashing a smile.

"You're just like a queen being followed by attendants like that. Though, this place is the majestic Mage's Guild, not your castle. So don't be mistaken, okay?"

"They are an essential force to battle the Black Beast. In other words, my comrades-in-arms. Calling them outsiders or attendants... I wonder who's the one mistaking Mage's Guild for their palace?"

In no time at all, Nine had coldly rebuffed the provocation with sarcasm.

Eight was at a loss for words. But she immediately pulled herself together and smiled. Then she moved her hands from her waist to her chest, folding her arms and embracing her body.

"Hmph, comrades-in-arms? If we remove Trinity, the rest are just suspicious people. There's a beastkin, werewolf, and two others who aren't even human. I've always considered you to be a strange person, but it's still a surprise to see you have a penchant for keeping non-humans in your service~."

Offended by her manner of speaking, Celica took a large step forward.

"Excuse me! I don't think it's like you've just said. Jubei-san, Valkenhayn-san, Hakumen-san, and Terumi-san are trying to beat the Black Beast with their utmost effort. I really don't approve of you... making a fool of the people who fight together with us!"

For Celica, the people Eight regarded as non-humans were her precious sister's comrades.

Celica didn't have enough power to save her sister. That was why Celica honestly had a great respect for them. Nine had approved their strength. They would wield that same strength to fight together with her. Celica felt a deep gratitude toward them.

It was unacceptable for people who barely knew them to insult them.

Nine put her hand on one of Celica's tense shoulders before speaking indifferently.

"Celica, you shouldn't speak too much with that woman. ...You might get infected with her worthless pattern of thinking."

"Wh-What did you say!? Hey, Nine. Is that how you talk your senior!?"

"Being polite is meaningless when the other party has spent their life pointlessly."

"Pointless... You're the one who's pointless!"

"Leave it at that, Eight. We have an important business to do, don't we?"

Seven's composure cut through the sparks building between the women like a knife cutting through butter.

As her partner didn't look even slightly disturbed, Eight made an effort to regain her composure and cleared her throat.

"I, Indeed. You're right. Nine... this has to wait until that thing's test run."

Slowly, Eight spoke directly to Nine as if the hysteria so far hadn't happened.

That thing. The words made Nine's face changed.

"Causality weapon..."

Celica turned around as her sister involuntarily muttered the phrase. Her

breath taken away, Nine cast her eyes down slightly. Her mouth seemed stiff.

Nine lightly made fists and then raised her gaze, looking from underneath the wide brim of her hat. It wasn't an expression of anger. If anything it was a look of contempt.

"Stop the development. Don't make me say it over and over again."

"...The same to you, don't make me say it over again. It is indispensable for humanity."

Even if he was aware that there was contempt in Nine's eyes, Seven, with his detestable calmness, kept his elegant smile.

Beside them, Eight flicked the crystal on her earring before she spoke.

"The preparation for its activation is about to begin soon. But a problem remains in the control system. It could be easily solved if Celica A. Mercury was involved."

Upon hearing her name, Celica jolted and pointed to herself.

Eight gave an exaggerated nod to persuade her.

"Yes. With your power, we can put it into combat. Will you cooperate?"

"No."

Nine declared strongly enough to cause the illusion to quickly break as if slapped by her voice.

"If it can't be controlled, then it should be disposed of. From the beginning, its existence was a mistake. I won't let Celica get involved. Ever."

Different from the sharp gaze that had been directed at Seven and Eight until now, there was now an invisible, surging vigor rampaging within her.

She gave the oppression life through her aggressive tone of voice. It made both opposing Ten Sages wince unintentionally. For just a split second, a humiliating fright showed on each of Seven and Eight's faces.

Looking at them from the side, anxiety stuck in Celica's mind. Just what was *that thing* that made Nine so strongly reject it like this.

She had a guess. Perhaps it was really terrifying. Or maybe it could expose

Celica's life to danger.

Back then... back at the Black Beast's last appearance eight months ago, there was something like this, too.

There was a device called *Kushinada's Lynchpin* in the underground of a certain research establishment. If it had been activated, it could have halted the Black Beast's activity. However, the activation required Celica's life.

Nine yelled that she absolutely objected in utilizing it. Celica said that she wanted to use it.

Nine's expression currently held some resemblance to the expression she had back then.

(...I think back then... it looked more like... she almost cried.)

Celica mumbled as she thought about it.

Interrupting Celica's sentiment, Seven held both his hands out wide. It seemed like he was about to give a speech.

"Nine. You truly don't understand. How many people do you think have lost their lives and live in fear due to the Black Beast? This isn't a circumstance where you should put your self-interest as priority."

Taking over from Seven, Eight talked passionately.

"I admit that the Armagus you've created is a superior measure. It's come to form because of the foundation you designed. I know that it'll be even more diverse later on, but humanity needs a decisive weapon that's more reliable!"

Celica could see that they seriously meant what they said from the bottom of their hearts. But even then, both of them couldn't ignite passion in Nine's eyes, which were staring at them with intense coldness.

"Dispose of it. That is an order from my position as someone who has complete authority regarding the Black Beast's engagement."

"What authority!? My rank in the Ten Sages is higher than yours!"

"My rights were decided in the meeting of the so called Ten Sages, Eight. Talk to the other Sages if you have complaints. And..."

Nine spoke on and on quickly. Her determination itself was unshakeable and unstoppable. Expressing her point even more heavily, Nine added a final remark.

"From now on, do not ever approach Celica again."

Celica stood dumbfounded unable to grasp even a fragment of the conversation. Then Nine grabbed her shoulder and quickly started to lead her away.

What stopped her feet wasn't the bewildered Celica, but Seven with a calmness that hid his real intention.

"I will say this once. Both Eight and I were reluctant in deciding you were the Sage who should possess complete authority in this matter. You are certainly talented. But handling an army is another kind of talent."

"...Then I will also say this once. The opponent we have to defeat is the Black Beast. Not someone with insignificant jealousy. And certainly not the world."

After leaving behind those words, this time Nine took Celica and got out of the courtyard.

Stiff noises rang within the Mage's Guild's hallway in a fast rhythm.

Nine's pace was usually fast. But it now, like it did at times, particularly made unpleasant footsteps.

Celica's flustered footsteps did their best to keep up.

"Onee-chan, Onee-chan!"

She had called out countless times. They got out of the Mage's Guild's main entrance with Nine's feet continuing at that rapid pace. Then Celica pulled her sister's arm firmly and forcibly stopped her.

"Onee-chan! I told you to wait, why don't you answer?"

"...You should know my answer if you listened before. This is all for you."

Without shaking off Celica's arms, Nine reluctantly stopped walking. Then she let out a sigh of resignation.

Celica's ponytail sprung as she quickly nodded.

"I did hear it. What's *that thing* that Seven-san and Eight-san were talking about earlier? What did they mean by "needing my power"?"

Even if someone had natural talent in magic, fitting training was required to handle it. But Celica was able to use healing magic from the beginning without any practice.

However, her healing magic wasn't the important one. The power gifted to Celica when she was born had more to do with her physical constitution.

Celica could suppress seithr just by being near it. In addition, she could also stop seithr from re-entering a place, allowing it to be completely cleared of seithr.

Celica didn't really understand her odd physical constitution. But she herself had vaguely guessed that her body was seemingly a bit peculiar.

She had thought that that was why what Eight said about *your power* was probably something no one but her could do.

"...It's better for you not to know."

Nine shook her head. She was slipping out of Celica's grasp, Celica hurriedly grabbed Nine again.

"You covering it up again! You're always like this!"

"Celica..."

The worried voice of the older sister reprimanded her.

Celica tightly grabbed her sister's hand in both of hers and looked up at her.

An honest determination dwelled beyond the pupils that had the color of wet soil. She stared so intensely that it was enough to pierce the person she was looking at.

"See, I know that you're thinking a lot of things regarding my safety. I'm happy that you're concerned and worried about me."

She must have already known what Celica was going to say next. Inside the stern eyes were trying to avoid her sister's gaze, a kindness she wouldn't give to anyone but Celica passed over Nine's eyes, as well as a frail and vulnerable look.

She noticed it, but Celica didn't hesitate to continue. After all, it was unmistakably her true feeling. She couldn't lie about her feelings to people important to her.

"But I'm not sure if I'll be happy not knowing about it. So even if I regret it, even if it puts you in trouble, I just can't comprehend it if I don't see it myself."

"I do know your personality. But I can't tell you anything about this case. I can't let you know about it. You can't even get involved with it even for a moment."

Nine didn't relent even in the wake of Celica's resolve. While pressing her forehead with her fingers like she had headache, Nine put her unshakeable resolution into words.

"Why are you so...!"

Getting irritated because Nine wouldn't reveal what she had been keeping from her, Celica's words turned sour in her protest.

However, something came to mind immediately. Nine had always been thinking about Celica. She knew about it as her protective actions had been accumulating from when they were children.

That was why if Nine told her to stay out so forcefully, then it must be something unfavorable to Celica.

"Is it something dangerous?"

Perhaps it concerned not just Celica, but something even more expansive.

Suppressing her childish selfishness, Celica lowered her eyes in worry.

Giving it a thought, Nine's sharp but also kind eyes were directed to somewhere distant.

"They're just desperate people wanting to utilize a failure. It's just a boring rivalry of adults. ...That's all."

Those words couldn't have been a lie. But for Celica, it didn't feel like she would tell the whole truth. Nine had always been concerned about Celica. She always had something she hid.

If Celica were to speak her intention, she wanted to ask what Nine was hiding and why she hid it. She wanted to know about all the circumstances. But Celica gave up on pressing her for a moment.

Her sister was just as stubborn as her. If she had decided not to, then she wouldn't yield so easily. Besides... considering Nine had been busy with strategy meetings and weapon development every day, Celica felt guilty if she ended up increasing her sister's burden with her selfish words.

"...You see. I'm not strong and not really good in using magic to fight. But I will do anything if I can be useful to you. That's why, tell me when the needs for my strength arrive."

Surely she would be excused if she was only this selfish. Celica looked forthrightly at Nine while telling her.

Nine's mouth began to open and made a slight smile. She gently released Celica's hands and then used her freed hands to wrap Celica's cheeks.

"Celica. You don't have to worry about anything. I will definitely protect you."

"Onee-chan..."

It by no means satisfied Celica. Because it meant that her sister didn't want her to help.

But her decision had supported Nine somewhat. If that could help her, then it was fine for now.

Celica put on a bright smile to cheer her up while thinking about it.

Since Nine and Celica had left, Seven and Eight were left in a courtyard filled with rich summer greenery's scent. With the same stern gaze, they stared

toward the gate leading to the Mage's Guild.

Eventually, Eight rudely stomped the stone pavement under her feet with the heel of her long boot in annoyance.

"Huh, what's with that woman!? Even though she's a newbie, she acts as if she's in control of the Mage's Guild, including us Ten Sages. She should act her tenure and show us some respect!"

As the single hit to the ground didn't relieve her of the resentment inside her stomach, Eight gnawed at her lipstick covered lips and walked around.

Looking from the side at the woman's long mantle as she paced around, Seven breathed a sigh while wrinkling his forehead. Lifting the thin frame of his glasses with his middle finger, he stiffly shook his head.

"Dispose of it...? That is no joke. Roughly speaking, it was us who constructed it until this stage. Not her. While it may be true that she assembled the foundation, it is annoying that she's acting like she owned it all this time."

"Hey, Seven. You don't really mean you're going to get rid of it, do you?"

Rushing over, Eight put her hand on Seven's shoulder, raising her eyes on him, demanding an answer.

"It is a hope. Humanity's... no, our hope! Sure, the Armagus is amazing, but it won't give us victory against the Black Beast. It's not significant enough to test out the difference in power with the monster!"

"I know. I am not planning to have it disposed of before my eyes. If it were fully realized, we could show the world Nine's shallowness."

A while after the heated discussion, Seven's tone of voice took a steep turn downward. The easy-going ice blue gaze looked dull.

"However... it cannot be used as of now. We need Celica A. Mercury."

"Can't we just use it without her?"

"We cannot as it is too dangerous. Calm yourself a little. Do you want to bear the stigma of killing your allies?"

"That's true, but do you think we can deceive Nine's eyes? Unless fortune's on

our side..."

"—It seems there's an interesting discussion going on here~."

All of a sudden, a third voice interrupted.

Startled, Seven and Eight's bodies stiffened.

There shouldn't be anyone in the courtyard. Seven and Eight had been checking for intruders with their magic. Before the moment they heard the voice, the courtyard was supposed to be clear of any visible creature other than insects and birds.

Eight rocked her large earrings as she turned around. Seven just glanced toward the voice.

Both of them recognized the man. At the same time, they both grasped the reason bit by bit. That's right. Since he was the man who followed her personally, it was no wonder if he could slip through the Ten Sages' eyes.

Step by step, the man drew near.

"Hey... tell me the details."

As if crawling out from the distinct shade of trees, the voice made a chill run up Seven and Eight's spines as he spoke.

## Part 3

There was a house that served as a coffee shop on the sideways of Ishana's main street.

The shop had a lovely atmosphere with clay ornaments arranged along its white wall. White and light brown planters were placed around the entrance. Together lined up with them was an easel with a small blackboard leaning on it. The blackboard had today's recommendations written.

The time was three and a half in the afternoon. It was a bit late to have a tea.

Running and skipping up a short set of stairs that only had three flight of steps, Celica entered the shop along with Nine. The ringing door chime above her sounded refreshing.

"Let's see..."

Trinity and the others had gone on ahead of them, so they should have arrived much earlier. Celica looked inside the store that had the sweet aroma of butter and sugar. Then, she saw a platinum blonde girl stand up and wave her small hand.

"There! Trinity-san, sorry to keep you waiting!"

As her footsteps made quiet tapping noises on the wooden floor, she went inside while leading Nine along.

Trinity and the others' table was next to a tall decorative plant. But before she pulled up a chair, Celica looked puzzled as she saw the faces there.

"Huh? Only you two?"

Only Trinity and Jubei were seated there. Valkenhayn, Hakumen, and Terumi, who should have left the courtyard with them earlier, were nowhere to be seen.

The cat at the table answered Celica's question while resting his chin on his hand.

"Valkenhayn and Hakumen said they have other appointment. Terumi said somethin' about goin' to the toilet along the way and disappeared on his own."

"Eeh!? Just when I thought everyone would finally have tea together..."

Dejected, Celica dropper her shoulders. She thought her longtime dream would come true today. But then she pulled herself together from the disappointment and raised her cheerful face before sitting down beside Jubei.

If they had errands, then there was nothing she could do. Starting from today, the base of operations was Ishana. There should be another chance later.

Nine also pulled up a chair. The white thighs peeking from her miniskirt

rubbed together as she crossed her legs. Even Celica took notice of it. She sat on an open seat between Trinity and Jubei.

Calling a waitress who was walking past, Nine ordered iced coffee and chocolate mousse.

"Ah, I want a cold lemon and... mille-feuille!"

As she wrote Celica's order, the waitress with a bob cut replied with a smile and turned back toward the kitchen.

"You should have eaten first. Both of you are really principled."

Facing Trinity and Jubei, Nine dropped a smile.

Both of their orders were already placed on the table. Before Trinity was a hot royal milk tea and baked cheese cake. But in front of Jubei was a cup filled with green tea and pound cakes with green tea powder. There were traces that they had drank for a bit, but their cakes remained untouched.

"There's a green tea menu here, huh? First time I saw it."

Celica curiously looked at the cup in front of Jubei. Jubei twitched his whiskers to humor her.

"Seems it's a new menu. It's thanks to the increasin' flow of goods from various countries."

"But you put cold water in it, didn't you."

From the next seat, Nine lightly poked fun at him. There was no steam coming from the cup. Beside the cup, there were several glasses that had previously been filled with water placed on the table.

Jubei's face started to look a little embarrassed.

"Can't help it. It's too hot."

"Fufu. You like tea but can't drink it hot. So cute."

Nine used her finger to poke the white fur on Jubei's cheek. Then, Jubei suddenly sprung up.

"Cute...!? Like I said, please stop sayin' things like that in public..."

"Oh, it's fine. There's only Celica and Trinity here."

"That's not the problem!"

"Ufufu, please don't worry about us~. Right, Celica-san~?"

Nine stared at the beastkin with a girlish look that would make the people in Mage's Guild who barely knew her stare in disbelief. Jubei's pointed ears kept twitching as he couldn't calm down.

Trinity nonchalantly brought her cup to her mouth while seeing their exchange.

Celica raised both hands and rested her chin there. She kept nodding with her face filled with a smile.

"Yup. I really like seeing Onee-chan and Jubei-san getting along. Although sometimes I get embarrassed, too."

"Y-You're wrong. I don't really... Uhhh..."

Jubei waved his shaking, bulky hand in the air.

Interrupting his excuse, the waitress finally came carrying Nine and Celica's orders.

Not wanting to expose himself anymore, Jubei pulled his head in toward his neck and tried to appear as small as possible. He lay in wait, concealing his sigh behind the sound of the orders being placed on the table.

After a while, the Mercury sisters drew each of their drinks toward themselves. When he heard the noise, Jubei could only let a sigh of relief and raised his face.

Then he dejectedly lowered his whiskers.

"...Of course, you're doin' it."

He dropped his voice as he muttered.

Not understanding at first, Celica followed Jubei's gaze and understood why.

Nine's supple fingers picked up a pitcher filled with gum syrup that was served with the iced coffee before pouring its entire contents into her glass. When the clear fluid finally depleted, this time she tilted another pitcher filled

with milk in the same manner. The white fluid quietly muddied the iced coffee.

"Ah, can I get another gum syrup?"



Without even a questioning look, the waitress Nine called immediately came with a spare pitcher.

Of course, she also poured it into her glass without leaving a drop.

The water level of the coffee that was now corrupted with syrup and milk had increased almost to the glass' edge.

Using a straw, Nine skillfully stirred the near overflowing iced coffee.

"I've said it already but... it's bad for your health."

Jubei knew it was pointless from the start. It was obvious from the way he sounded like he had given up.

Acting like it didn't concern her at all, Nine calmly drank the abnormally thick iced coffee.

"Actually, it'll be good for my health if I ingest a moderate amount of sugar."

"Uh. Is that... moderate?"

"Jubei. You don't like sweets that much? "

"It's not like that... Nah, it's fine. My bad."

After his doubtful eyes glanced at the empty pitcher again, Jubei seemed to avert his eyes and then sipped his warm green tea.

Contemplating the banter, Celica exchanged a look with Trinity. They both burst into laughter at the same time.

Reacting immediately, Jubei stared at them with a bitter look on his sullen face.

"...What. Why are you laughin'?"

"No, no. Nothing at all."

"Ufufu. Please don't mind us~."

Playing dumb, Celica and Trinity spontaneously hid their suggestive smiles with both hands.

For several months, Nine and Jubei had noticeably been getting close. It wasn't an exaggeration saying that they had become intimate. Celica was happy

with it.

Everyone had been commenting on Nine's natural gift and her abilities. Moreover, they also said Nine had a violent temperament and that she wouldn't go easy on anyone. Trinity was the only friend that had become close to her older sister. It had even been years since Celica had heard tale of Nine being approached by any guys.

For her sister to be acting this lovey dovey with someone while having tea was... Rather than a younger sister, the delight she felt was like what a mother would have.

Nine drank her iced coffee while watching every single move from Jubei. Meanwhile, Jubei kept getting flustered even though he was going out with her.

While watching both of them, Celica cheerfully ate her mille-feuille. The light pie and strong taste of the custard cream's egg now seemed to taste even better.

Then, Trinity suddenly half-rose to her feet.

"Ah, Kazu... Terumi-san."

Blending in with the friendly chatter inside the store, a small and sweet voice called the name.

As Celica turned around, she saw a tall man wearing a low hood approaching them. He didn't really seem to fit with the fairy-tale atmosphere of the store.

Instead of calling to him, Celica waved her hand. Terumi abruptly stopped for a moment. But without making the previous action look obvious, he came close to their table.

Just after that, Nine's eyes sharpened.

"Where did you go?"

As if reflecting her doubting voice, the atmosphere stiffened.

But Terumi didn't pay any attention to the change in the atmosphere. He simply laughed. Avoiding the empty space next to Celica, he sat down beside Trinity.

"Toilet, toilet. You heard from them, didn't you?"

"You'd better stop just doing everything as you please."

"Hmm, so you'll wait for me whenever I go to toilet? Nice hobby you've got there."

Nine's look grew even sharper. The atmosphere made it felt like she was about to grab him by the collar. Celica placed both hands on the table as if to interrupt them.

"Onee-chan, Terumi-san. Let's stop this already. We're having tea now."

Without attracting the attention of other customers, Celica put on a reproachful tone.

Taking the opportunity, Terumi raised both hands; as if to indicate that he surrendered.

"Hey, you're doubting me too much. Forgot? I can't *lie* to you. You're the one who cast that annoying spell on me."

Terumi had been inflicted with *Mind Eater* by Nine. It made him unable to disobey Nine's command, neither could he lie to her.

"You're wasting time doubting me. Don't you hate doing pointless things? Miss. Ten. Sages."

His sarcasm made Nine's eyebrows twitch. But before she could answer, Jubei interrupted.

"Don't get too sensitive, Nine. Mind Eater's working. Has he actually gone against your order once?"

Nine could just find his whereabouts if she felt like it. Even when earlier Jubei told her that Terumi was gone, Nine should have searched for Terumi's location. As its result was that she knew he was heading to the store, she didn't look deeper into it.

Both Jubei and Celica gave a soothing look at Nine. Then she put it aside and sighed.

"...Oh well. It's not good arguing here."

Averting her eyes from the gazes, Nine scooped her chocolate mousse with fork.

Seeing the conversation was over, Terumi greatly tilted his chair and stopped an unfortunate waitress from passing by.

"Hey, miss. Get me the usual black tea and a hardboiled egg."

As he arbitrarily made an order, Terumi returned the chair to its original position with a slight scraping noise.

Trinity just watched the scene quietly beside him.

Whenever Trinity looked at Terumi, sometimes, just sometimes, she would make a pained look. Even Celica knew the reason. Terumi really resembled him. A young student who was very close to Trinity that unfortunately had disappeared from the academy unnoticed.

Their behavior and expressions were completely different, but their voices and presence were surprisingly similar. If he were to remove the hood he always wore, she wondered if the face of her friend would appear.

That was why when Terumi was here, Trinity was always reminded of that friend of hers. Even though it had been eight months, Celica could still remember Ragna on a whim.

When she thought about him, a suffocating sensation arose in her chest.

"Okay!"

Determined, Celica suddenly raised the corners of her eyes and struck the table with both hands.

"Let's talk about something fun!"

The atmosphere had been somewhat gloomy for a while. Heavy. Painful.

In this tea time that was supposed to be fun, Celica wanted for everyone to get along more and get to know each other. Fully embracing that belief, Celica haphazardly stood up.

However, during that moment, Celica plunged forward too far and her feet connected with the table's leg.

"Wha, wha..."

As the momentum ruined her balance, Celica began to tip backwards.

"Look out, Celica!"

Jubei immediately reacted. He stretched his hand to support Celica from the side. Jubei's hand supported Celica... or as it would have if Celica hadn't made the poor decision to grab the back of the chair where Jubei had been sitting.

Celica's hand firmly grabbed the back of the chair and grasped it strongly. Along with Jubei's tail.

"UGYAAH!?"

A terrible scream the likes that no-one had heard before escaped from Jubei's mouth. The small furry body jumped on the spot with a jolt.

With incomparable strength, Jubei's knees hit the tabletop. The table rose in a big way from the impact. Nine was surprised. Then the iced coffee she held leaped out of her hands...

The spilling mixture of iced coffee, gum syrup, and coffee milk was now all over Trinity's face.

"Ah..."

The small voice was Trinity's.

Then a painful silence flowed into the ears of the people sat around the table.

Even the gentle friendly chat around the shop, which should have been present, seemed to completely vanish.

Eventually, Trinity gently removed the glasses that were soaked with the thick liquid of Nine's coffee.

Her expression was hidden by the fluffy hair flowing from her fringe and both sides. However, there was no doubt that the mood had shifted.

"...It seems my glasses are stained."

The sweet echo sounded the same as ever. Contrary to its calm tone, fear clouded Celica and Nine's hearts as they began to understand the situation.

"Uh, umm, Trinity-san...? So-Sorry. I, um, never thought this would happen...!"

"Let's talk it through, Trinity! We surely will come into understanding!"

"Wh-What? What's going on?"

Though he grasped the tension of the situation, seeing Celica and Nine apologizing profusely, Jubei couldn't understand what was happening. He became flustered while still holding his aching tail.

Nine then grasped his hand.

"I'll tell you the reason later. But for now, we should apologize. You too!"

Turning around far enough that his neck clicked, Terumi, who was stretching his hand to get the black tea that had just come, raised his face.

"Huh? Me too!?"

"Just apologize!"

"Tch, dammit. What's with you? Her glasses are just dirty, so..."

"'Just'? Did you say 'just'...?"

Trinity's whisper silenced Terumi's abusive words as he started to grumble. Normally, it wouldn't happen. But currently, Trinity wasn't her usual calm self.

In the end, Trinity slowly took a breath.

"...Everyone, I have to tell you something."

Her smile was kind enough to be horrific.

## Part 4

The moon was once again full in the sky of the endless night. It looked like a giant water basin.

The silver light pouring forth from the white disc was serene and cold. It illuminated the castle which stood beautiful but solemn within a vast rose garden. It was like something from a fairy tale stood there alone in the silence.

A place belonged to nowhere, yet connected with every dark night of the world. Existing but nonexistent. Similar the dark side of the moon... Once, this place was described as such by the lord of the castle. The castle once belonged to a vampire who spent his life watching over the people of the world.

Her predecessor, Clavis Alucard, had died around eight months ago, Rachel Alucard presently acted as the castle's lady. Still a young female vampire, this torn, small world recognized her as its new master. It was painted in the bountiful red of roses, befitting the youth of the castle's lady.

The spectacle of the garden was magnificent to behold, as could be seen from a long vertical window installed at the front of the castle.

Rachel touched the cold windowpane with the young fingers peeking from the sleeve of her black dress. Slipping away from her favorite scenery, she averted her gaze from it and elegantly turned around.

"...I see. You can't remember it still."

Following the girl's movement, her golden hair, tied at high position on both sides, swayed along with its large decorative ribbons.

A faint magical light flickered inside the room, revealing two figures beside Rachel.

Sweeping over the tall man with the muscular body. The rose red pupils of the adolescent girl fixed on a taller figure. Illuminated by the faint light, the emerging white figure looked just like a ghost.

"It appears that we cannot depend on your memories, Mr. Hero of the Future."

Putting aside her slight disappointment, Rachel addressed the ghost.

The ghost's name was Hakumen.

"...Do you know what he intends to accomplish?"

He stared directly at Rachel without making even a slight movement,

questioning her in a muffled voice. Those who didn't know Hakumen would think he was a talking sculpture.

Amused, Rachel slowly blinked her doll-like large eyes.

"Compared to you who doesn't remember anything, I would say so."

"Then, is that man really scheming something...?"

Between Hakumen and Rachel, the other man asked a little bit over-eagerly. When he took a step forward, the long hair tied at his back swayed anxiously. He was Valkenhayn.

Toward the question from the loyal butler who had been serving since her father, Clavis' time, Rachel answered not with words. She turned toward the window again and only responded with silence and a distant gaze.

In his regret, Valkenhayn tightened a fist in front of his chest.

"Regardless, that man has the scent of danger. He shouldn't have been released before... It is not too late. While Mind Eater is still in effect, I shall take his life!"

"You must not, Valkenhayn."

With the coolness of the north wind, Rachel severed the butler's fierceness.

Contrary to their young appearance, her eyes contained deep wisdom. The blood red pupils faintly wavered.

"That man must not be killed. He still has some value. No, his help is indispensable. If not, then there will be no significance in anyone's struggle."

After speaking that much, Rachel briefly sighed. When she closed her eyes, her long eyelashes made shadows on the pale skin around her eyes.

"...Besides, we are not able to kill that man."

The whisper slightly shook the air under her breath.

Groaning, Valkenhayn turned silent. Hakumen just stood there quietly.

Without looking at either of them, Rachel lightly bit her flower bud-like lips.

Her eyes were watching everything in the world. Her ears were hearing

everything in the world. Her mind was memorizing everything in the world. However, her hands couldn't change the world. Even if she knew what awaited in the future.

"It is humanity's choices that will decide the future. It will never change now and forever. That is why, it is not something we can change."

The red eyes looked at the white face. They held some sympathy.

There was a deteriorating sweet scent in the flowing silence. It might have come from Valkenhayn's master.

Eventually, Hakumen moved and turned his back from the young lady of the castle. The tall, large sword he carried bore some kind of dignity.

"If that is your conclusion, then I will not oppose you. However, whether you choose providence, reasons, or neither, I have a different belief than yours."

"You spoke of interesting thing. Will you try and do the impossible?"

"My blade is to slay my enemy... the Dark One. I would cut reasons to carry that purpose if I had to."

After leaving those words, Hakumen took a large step forward. With the long silver hair at his back swaying, he left the dim room.

Watching over the retreating figure from behind, Rachel gave a weak smile. But her eyes were far from smiling as they gleamed with cold light.

"...Cut reasons... Then you would sever this tale? Would you, Mr. Hero?"

The moon in the sky of the rose garden didn't reply. Of course, Rachel didn't have the answer to her own question.

There was only her incomparably loyal butler bowing to her before exiting the room to brew her tea.

While listening to the departing footsteps, Rachel opened the window wide. As she did so, the scent of the night and roses surged in.

In the mood of the night. In the empty mood of the night, she longed to drink Valkenhayn's black tea.

# **BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Chapter 3**

## **Chapter 3: Scarlet Guardian, the Doll**

### **Part 1**

Before they noticed, the sun had sunk into the western sea. The lights in Ishana's city started to flicker on, triggered by magic in the twilight.

When the sun had almost set, the change from noon to night on this island happened almost instantly. Disrobing from its cloak of sun, the wind dressed itself in night and ran through the town as if on a whim.

While hearing the happy sound of the door chime, Celica stepped out from a familiar coffee shop. The cold wind caressed her cheeks. As she viewed the western sky that was tinged with pink, Celica sighed while seemingly looking sad.

It had been while since she'd had such a thrilling tea time like today.

Earlier before, Trinity slowly stood up and started to talk while smiling as her irritation manifest itself. Celica had hoped someone would stop her. She wondered what would happen if someone had tried. Since she had personally experienced Trinity's anger... Celica didn't think she could have stopped her.

"...indeed. The world is brimming with sad events. There is sorrow from being unable to stand up against threats, and also from inescapable destiny. But is it really just in the human's mind? Even when people, even when fellow people

take each other's hands, share their grief, and rejoice together, their minds are able to drown in the distant sea of deep sorrow. Aah, that in itself is such a sad thing. Do we just, without thinking much about it, just think 'The world is full of sadness, if at least one person is made happy, it's good'? The reason of why people pray in the first place is to..."

There was one thing people couldn't forgive and one thing people had to endure no matter what. Starting from that topic, Trinity's lecture moved to why people get angry and sad before finally changing to her personal opinion about how sadness was born.

It wasn't clear what route she took as it subtly developed into religious studies before finally ending in some kind of dissertation. ...No one really remembered how it went anymore.

But the overwhelming amount of words and confusingly fast pace held the power to completely blow the listener's train of thought within ten minutes. They shouldn't wade in deeper than that. That kind of thought was currently brewing in Celica's mind.

Now, while feeling the cool night wind in front of the coffee shop, although she only briefly recalled what happened just before, the inside of Celica's mind was bubbling and made her fall into a deluded state.

As the door chime rang again, Nine, Jubei, and Trinity exited the store. At the end of the procession was Terumi. Fed up, he hunched his thin shoulders.

It wasn't just Celica and Terumi. It being his first experience, Jubei was shocked. Also Nine even though she had grown more accustomed to it than everyone else. She could only made a stiff smile given her exhaustion.

"I'm truly sorry, everyone~. It happened again... but at least we've finally had tea together~."

The only person who didn't show any signs of fatigue, Trinity, lowered her eyebrows in shame. She wrapped up both of her cheeks in her hands and dropped her shoulders.

Although Celica wore a bitter smile, she waved her hand to say it was okay.

"Don't take it to heart. It was my fault to begin with."

"No, please don't be mistaken~. I wasn't angry because you stood up, or because Jubei-san's feet hit the table. That was just an accident. Rather, I'm worried that the two of you may have hurt yourself~."

"A,ahaha. I'm okay, I'm okay. Despite the loud noise, it wasn't painful at all."

Yes, Trinity didn't get furious because the table was shaken or because Nine spilled her coffee.

She genuinely had lost control of herself simply because her glasses were stained.

They were only glasses, but they were Trinity's glasses. Because she lost herself over a single item that was nothing but a trifle ornament for most people, Trinity's wrath was frightening... or so Celica thought.

"Is it truly okay?"

It seemed she became worried when she recalled it. Trinity's apology had a different kind of worry as her eyes looked at Celica's feet.

When her wrath lessened, Trinity returned to her usual gentle and slow self. Nonchalantly throwing away the fear and fatigue that had been present until now, Celica smiled cheerfully.

"Yup! Look, there's no wound!"

While saying that, Celica lifted her skirt to show her unharmed thighs. Nine instantly slapped Celica's hands. A sharp noise rang out.

"What have you done!? What are you going to do if you catch the attention of some lecherous men passing by!? Consider your vulnerability and cuteness more!!"

"Ouchie~. You don't have to hit me. I wasn't particularly showing my undies or anything."

"Undies!? ...Excuse me, every living man in the world is just a creature obsessed with indecent fantasies from the time they were a brat. They're a lump of wild lust and perverted thoughts. Because your fair skin robs the eyes of those near you, you're surrounded by many shameless fantasies... Aah, it's disgusting to even think about it. Listen, watch out the next time you do

something thoughtless. I'll make sure none of the passing men are able to feel lust any more!"

"...Ain't your head itself got quite a few of those shameless fantasies?"

Terumi muttered at a spot several steps away. With force enough to dishevel her hair, Nine turned about. Her high heels clattered toward him. Quick as a flash, Nine kicked Terumi's stomach with the tip of her toe without hesitation.

"Gueh!"

"I have to find way to make men lose their function as a man. Should I practice on your body?"

"...I'm...against...violence."

Holding his stomach with both hands, Terumi crumpled and fell, starting from the knees. His groan could still be heard as he sunk to the floor.

Flustered, Trinity rushed over. Terumi responded by whispering something to the anxious Trinity. However, Celica and Nine didn't hear what he said.

"Well, time for me to go."

As the passing twilight wind rustled his whiskers, Jubei looked at each of them as he spoke.

Nine raised her face and tucked back the hair that was flowing on its own.

"Oh, already?"

"I've been requested to investigate more of Eastern Europe. Incidentally, there seems to be some information circulatin' in Ishana. I'm goin' lookin' for it."

"I see. Get in touch if something happens."

With the face of the commander of operation against the Black Beast, but also the face of a young lady, Nine sent off Jubei with a smile.

"Later," said Jubei as he turned back. Celica also frantically waved him off.

"Take care!"

His two tails swayed at his back as if returning the gesture.

As Jubee vanished around the street corner, the presence of the surrounding night became even more intense. When Celica looked up at the sky, distant stars started to blink.

"I should return home soon. Are you and the others still having a meeting later, Onee-chan?"

Celica linked her hands behind her back as she asked the question.

Trinity, who was lending a hand to Terumi as he got up, gently shook her head.

"The meeting is already over. And since I have heaps of documents to write, I'll be taking my leave for tonight."

"I'm gonna go home too. I have an assignment given by that hysterical woman."

No sooner after he spoke, the hem of his long coat swept past. Rough footsteps hit the stone pavement as Terumi walked away. He was heading to a housing complex managed by the Mage's Guild. Because of the Mind Eater, the scope of Terumi's ability to act alone was limited. The complex was also where he spent most of his time by himself.

While pinning down her hood so it wouldn't get blown by the strong wind, Trinity gracefully smiled and went on her way after exchanging farewells.

Standing on tiptoe, Celica waved her hand to her older sister's close friend. After the fairy-tale like figure faded from sight, Celica turned to Nine.

"Then let's go, Onee-chan. Ah, do you have to go back to the guild?"

"No, I'll return home. ...But Celica, can I have a moment?"

With a peaceful smile, Nine asked Celica while walking as if urging her to return home.

After catching up to her, Celica looked to her sister. It was rare for Nine to speak like that.

"Okay. But what is it? Is something wrong?"

The footsteps of both Celica's leather shoes and Nine's high heels beat the

same rhythm as they hit the stone pavement.

Even without the fast pace, Nine's glossy hair drew a beautiful and gentle waves from the petty wind.

"I have something I want you to see."

"Something for me to see... Is it a present?"

Half hoping and half joking, Celica's eyes were gleaming. Nine narrowed her eyes gently at her.

"I'll tell you more later. Anyway, we should get back home... Come to my workshop."

The informed words made Celica unintentionally stumble before stopping. She couldn't quite breathe out the air she had involuntarily swallowed.

Nine's workshop. A place where none was permitted to tread with the exception of Nine herself.

## Part 2

Nine's workshop was located in the basement of their home.

The room was previously used by Celica and Nine's father as his laboratory. But about two years ago, Nine remodeled it into her personal workshop. It was done immediately after the simple funeral for her missing father was over.

Its entrance was installed at a hardly visited corner at the house where they lived every day.

Their father had prohibited the children from entering the laboratory. Nine also didn't normally let any visitors enter the basement.

Since before their father had left, Celica had never opened the door. Passing through it, Celica followed Nine's lead to a solid staircase descending into the

basement.

The staircase was surprisingly broad and went deeper than she had thought. There were magical lights furnished at regular intervals on the wall. The white lights burnt orange in the middle, illuminating their destination. Celica more or less could no longer comprehend that this place was under her own house.

Nine's high heels made loud steps each time she stepped down. With each step, tension piled up inside Celica.

Generally, a magician wouldn't show their own workshop to others, even if the other party was their family or lover. Furthermore, her sister's workshop contained research that shouldn't be spoken of.

It must be something significant since Nine was personally bringing Celica to her sanctum.

While being conflicted over whether to be hopeful or uneasy, Celica finally arrived at the end of the stairs.

Another door awaited there.

Not only did it have countless magic circles floating on its surface, it was also furnished with an electric panel on the nearby wall and what appeared to be a tiny surveillance camera on the ceiling. There might even be more devices that Celica hadn't noticed yet.

A secure entrance to her workshop was very fitting for Nine.

"I've said this before, but inside it's quite messy. Be careful not to step on something weird."

Looking over her shoulder as she spoke, Nine held her hand out to the door.

She spoke several spells without pause. Each time, various size of magic circle came apart before vanishing.

Fiddling with the electric panel, she chanted another spell. Then finally, the workshop's entrance opened with a slight noise.

"Ex... Excuse me."

Discreetly muttering, Celica went inside, following after Nine.

Then immediately, she stopped in the entrance.

The room inside was filled with lights similar to those on the staircase. All four walls were stone brick; the floor and ceiling had been solidified with stone.

There were large tables placed on both sides of the entrance. Various tools and equipment were crammed onto the tables. They ranged from things Celica recognized to some that she couldn't tell the purpose of. Further inside, there were two bookcases, which reached up to the ceiling like pillars, and also a writing desk and chair that didn't seem to be anything special.

The so called wall in the room was entirely covered in the countless memos stuck to it. Nine had a strong habit in scribbling. They were messily written on those rectangular pieces of paper. If it weren't Celica or Trinity, the scribbles might look undecipherable.

"This is... Onee-chan's..."

The workshop of Nine, the ninth of the Ten Sages.

Thinking about it, this was the first time for Celica to enter a magician's workshop. She wondered if other magicians' workshop would be like this, too.

When Celica looked inside the room, Nine had already gone inside the room unnoticed before turning around with arms folded.

"This way. And don't touch anything on the desk. They'll be hard to find if you rearrange anything."

"Ah, okay."

Although she was still puzzled, Celica quickly made her way between the desks and bookcases before jogging toward Nine.

There was another room in the back. Rather than feeling messy, the room had another kind of atmosphere in it. Its wall was obscured by large machinery and complicated devices. It wasn't a disordered room.

In a corner of the room, stood a large doll.

"Wha..."

Spontaneously, a surprised voice leaked from Celica's lips.

It was taller even than Hakumen, the tallest person Celica knew. But if Celica had to say something, the doll had slender limbs. Its metallic face was modeled after a lady in her middle age.

Judging from the face, as well as the clothes it was modeled with, something like a dress with long skirt, the doll must be a female type.

But its body was a bit large for a doll. The body proportions were also strange as its arms were big and long.

"You wanted to show me this?"

Still wide-eyed, Celica's gaze repeatedly darted back and forth between Nine and the doll.

Nine gazed at Celica with a warm look. She assured her by nodding and then moved her gaze to the doll.

"You see, this doll would act with the purpose of 'guarding' a predetermined person. It'd protect them from danger and then lead them to escape. Depending on the situation, it would chase away the attackers."

"Ooh, like a bodyguard."

"Yes. She's a bodyguard. Your bodyguard."

"Eh?"

Unable to grasp what Nine had just so calmly said, Celica asked again with her mouth half-opened.

Wondering if it sounded odd, Nine gave her a light smile.

"From here onward, the state of things in the world will get worse. My remaining time in Ishana keeps decreasing. Even when I'm staying on the island, my time with you is quite limited. That's why I made a bodyguard for you, to prevent any unexpected occurrence while I'm not at your side."

"Aha... But whatever the circumstances is, don't you think it's too exaggerated?"

Celica gave her a wry smile.

Nine worried too much about Celica. She was thankful for the thought, but

Celica didn't expect Nine to go as far as to make a bodyguard.

"I'm not really in that much danger. And in the any case, I won't be leaving the island with you and the others. I don't think there's anything here that I need to be protected from."

Ishana was referred to as *the world's safest island*.

The island was guarded by an invisible magical barrier. It could even handle physical attacks, like stopping a missile barrage for example. Anything trying to enter the island was examined by the barrier to see if it contained any risk related to organic or inorganic matter. Even leaving the island required a number of procedures.

Naturally, the possibility for seithr and seithr-induced mad creatures to get inside and harm the people in Ishana was equal to zero.

In response to Celica who was comfortably laughing, Nine on the contrary knitted her eyebrows to stress her concern.

"You leaving the island or not is a different story. I wholeheartedly reject the opinion that you are not in danger."

"Eeh, why!? I'm not particularly at risk or anything."

Growing slightly more sullen, Celica argued with her. When she did that, Nine severely sharpened the glint in her eyes and frowned.

"Who was it again that slipped away from the island unauthorized without going through the proper procedures? Who was it that could not be contacted for a month because of it, before finally getting stranded in the middle of a mountain? Hmm, I wonder who~?"

"T-That was, umm, a coincidence. It's because there were unclear circumstances..."

Still fresh in their memories, the incident that had developed into a quite a dangerous experience was being brought up. Celica blatantly averted her eyes and her awkward smile.

Since that was when she had met Ragna, the incident was a trigger that led to very profound memories for Celica herself... But in Nine's case, it must be a

matter that had shortened her life span considerably.

Nine brazenly let out an astonished sigh.

"It's not just that. Tomorrow morning, the threat to your daily life we spoke of will be about to begin."

"Aha... I get it. Are you worried?"

"By all means, please be aware that I am."

Celica scratched her cheeks since she absolutely couldn't declare that she didn't remember. With a pompous manner, Nine displayed a composed smile to her.

After that, anxiety flashed across her eyes, just for a moment.

"...It's fine for you to think I'm worrying too much. But four months time, it's hard to predict what will happen to Ishana. Don't you agree?"

"I see... Only four months left."

The Black Beast was being stalled for a year. Four months from now, that peace would be over.

It was something Celica was fully aware of. In preparation for that day, Nine, Trinity, and the others were giving their all to work hard every day.

But the thing was, Nine had always been prone to worry to the point that it astonished the people around her. It was easy to imagine her worrying about Celica even though she was immersed in her work.

Perhaps this doll might be the physical manifestation of her older sister's anxiety.

Thinking about it while looking up at her newly met bodyguard, a warm feeling gradually filled Celica. Then she began to smile broadly.

People viewed the beautiful, yet terrifying, Nine of the Ten Sages with awe. And yet, in secret, she was so afraid for the people close to her getting hurt. The anxiety she felt had always been unbearable.

Celica loved that her sister held some fragility, just like everyone else.

"Got it. Well then, I guess I'll take the bodyguard since you've already built it.

You did make it especially for me, after all."

After a short hop toward the doll, Celica turned to face Nine.

Standing with her arms folded below her chest like usual, Nine let out a sigh of relief and relaxed her eyes.

"That's right. I created it for you, to protect you. Something I made to protect my dear family."

"Thank you, Onee-chan. Actually, I took a liking to this girl the first time I saw her. She's quite tall, but also seems beautiful and kind."

Completely focused, Celica stared at the doll with her large brown eyes. Nine stared at her in wonder, amazement and also admiration.

"What a girl. You know it's different from playing with a doll, right? Besides, I have yet to input her personality. The mouth also doesn't move."

"Is that true? So I can't chat with her... But it's fine, I still like her."

"...I see. Then I'm glad."

Nine's astonishment changed into a wry smile.

Unable to exactly comprehend why her sister was so amazed, Celica tilted her head and replied with a smile too. She wondered if Nine wasn't pleased. It was so like her to be so worried.

In order to switch her feelings, Nine let out a deep sigh and let go of the strength in her shoulders. Then, she looked at Celica with a serious expression.

Getting roped in as expected, Celica straightened her back.

"Also, regarding the matter with Seven and Eight."

"Ah... okay. It's about the conversation in the courtyard before, isn't it?"

"...Sorry, but I'm not going tell you what they are trying to do. But I can tell you this. If you cooperate with those lot, you'll lose your life for sure."

From her voice and expression alone, Celica could understand how serious Nine was as she said it. But Celica didn't immediately nod. After biting her lip once, she looked straight at her sister.

"But I will do my best to help. It doesn't mean I'd sacrifice myself, but maybe they just wanted some help with their research. They might find a solution that doesn't require my sacrifice."

Celica didn't know exactly what Seven and Eight were making and the significance of her being necessary. But whatever it was, if it could help Nine's plan, then Celica thought that her resolve wouldn't lose out to Nine's.

It wasn't about some sort of burning feeling to be recognised by Nine or wanting to help in the fight herself. But if there was a way for her to do something, then she wanted to give a bit of relief to others by doing it.

But looking into her sister's eyes as they became grim, Celica understood that she had made a careless remark.

Celica thought that she was going to receive a harsh lecture, but instead Nine turned her face away to hide her dejected face before dropping her voice to let the hate out.

"What they're doing isn't that simple."

Celica understood a little.

She didn't have a complete grasp of it in the end. But from the bottom of her heart, Nine was disgusted with what Seven and Eight were trying to do.

"Celica. I want to protect your life no matter what. ...After all, that man risked himself to protect you."

That man. When she heard those words, Celica got attacked by a sensation that tightened her chest.

Eight months ago, she met and parted with a man. Ragna. The promise he gave and exchanged with her. Many kinds of thought rushed through her mind.

Nine, who had been crossing her arms, embraced herself so tightly that her fingers sunk into her skin. It seemed the disordered wrinkles on her clothes showed Nine's emotions.

"To think that I was about to sacrifice you... I absolutely can't forgive myself."

"Onee-chan..."

What should she do? Nine endured herself to speak. To Celica, her voice sounded like she was condemning herself.

Something. She wanted to do something. But since she couldn't let a single word out, Celica slowly reached out her hands to embrace Nine.

When Celica's hand touched her arm, Nine let go of her superfluous strength after a short pause. Her mouth was soft, but a strong will resided in her pupils. Without changing that, she spoke to Celica.

"Got it? Even without those meddling losers, I will show you that I can defeat the Black Beast. Believe in your sister. There is nothing impossible for her."

"Okay, got it. I'll trust you."

Celica nodded quite easily. It seemed as simple as when she was asked to do the weekly shop. But it was definitely not something trivial in her mind. It was just that easy. It was a thousand times easier than not getting lost when going to a bakery in the neighborhood.

Moreover, in Nine's opinion, Celica had to compare it with the difficulty to get to the bakery taking the shortest path, or she would get confused. But for now, Celica decided not to think about her own constitution of easily getting lost.

"Hey, Onee-chan. What's her name?"

If she were to trust Nine, she would have to befriend the bodyguard to reduce some of her sister's worries. Celica hopped to its front and picked took the doll's hand.

Its hand was big and cold, but she was growing to like even its improper modelling and unnatural feel.

"She's Nirvana."

After she answered, Nine began to chant a spell. A spell so that Nirvana would recognize Celica as the subject to protect.

But for Celica, it sounded simpler than a vow to protect or a contract between master and servant. If she were to explain it, then it might be a promise of friendship.

"Let's get along, Nirvana."

Smiling, she gripped the hand she had taken in a handshake. After she opened her eyes, Nirvana awkwardly moved her neck and stared at Celica with her artificial eyes.

After Celica had left to prepare for dinner, Nine remained in the workshop alone, wanting to work on something.

Nirvana returned to the surface, following Celica. After using magic to confirm that the workshop's door had been tightly shut, Nine stood between the two bookshelves as if ensnared by them.

The wall there was wide enough for two people. A number of drawings were pasted there in the place of furniture.



Nine faced the wall and held up her hand. As she did, reacting to its master, a small magic circle emerged from the other side of the drawings.

A few short phrases and a twist of her hand in the air made the magic circle rotate. Next, the wall itself started to turn.

Beyond the now open wall, a staircase leading even further into the basement was formed.

Nine stepped forward and then breathed life to the staircase that was normally shut in deep darkness by creating a faint light.

This staircase was much, much, longer than the one leading to the workshop itself. Nine's heels etched noises as she walked.

The air was cold, full of the characteristic feeling of being underground.

What awaited at the end of the prolonged journey was a large gate made of old wood.

Nine used both hands to push the gate, which was so plain as to be unbefitting of its large size. An enormous magic circle manifested before spinning like a cogwheel. Then the gate solemnly and gracefully opened its mouth.

A noise of heels stepping inside.

Appropriate with the descending staircase, beyond the door was a room with a ceiling as tall as eyes could see. Different from the upper floor, the wall, ceiling, and floor were covered in metal. The considerable size of the area was enough to cleanly fit Nine's workshop in it.

But the inside that should have had plenty of space was occupied by something rather gigantic.

The object was an upside down cone, barely suspended from the ceiling by chains.

In accordance with its abnormal, or incomprehensibley coated silver surface, a great number of faintly shining green lines ran across it.

Its structure made it hard to believe that it was manufactured by man's hands. The structure was lovely. If someone were to say that it was sculpted by

god, a large number of people might firmly believe it.

The object that appeared to be a huge nail was encircled by a number of purple rings. They were seals Nine had created. They were so secure that they gave off a sense of tenacity over and over again.

"I've never thought... that I might have to borrow your power."

With her back facing the closed gate, Nine hatefully gazed at the suspended silver and green object.

It was a device found at the location where Black Beast first appeared. Now the place was called *District 1*. It was able to temporarily stop the flow of seithr that originated from the Boundary.

Its manufacturer was Shuuichirou Ayatsuki. Nine and Celica's father.

"...Kushinada's *Lynchpin*."

The gigantic wedge might have heard Nine's muttering as it loudly pulsed a single green light.

## Part 3

Ishana was covered with a barrier which had been protecting it from seithr. The barrier was so strong that even the weather of the outside world was unable to affect the island.

Due to seithr, the climate had been disturbed and the planet had lost the concept of seasons. The usual traits that happened when summer turned into autumn were no more. The warmth on the air felt the same as ever.

It was just perfect to wear long sleeved clothes since most of the days in August were in that condition. Speaking of change, Celica wondered if the color of the sunset would have been even prettier during other seasons.

The pretty sunset was about to commence in the western sky when Celica

was walking homewards as she had finished with today's lessons at the academy.

Nirvana was walking alongside her on the way back.

The truth was, Celica had been thinking of leaving Nirvana waiting for her at home when she went to the academy. She wouldn't want to attract attention while just walking to school.

However, Nine had been making Celica take Nirvana along wherever she went when she was not on the island. Since it was a request rather than an order, Celica resigned herself and decided to bear the odd looks from her surroundings.

Of course, Celica couldn't bring her into the classroom. Thus, Nine had been using her position as a Ten Sage to borrow an office inside the Mage's Guild for Nirvana to standby there while Celica was taking a class.

It took time and effort travelling to and from the Mage's Guild like she did every morning and evening. However, Celica enjoyed her bizarre accompanied commute a little. The reason might be because she hadn't had any company on her walk since Nine was gone and all of her close friends were living in the student dormitory.

When she looked up at the tall doll that had been matching her walking pace, the light of the day that had begun to turn orange was reflected on Nirvana's metallic skin and glass-like clear eyes. It was pretty.

"Come to think of it, I wonder how many days left until Onee-chan gets back. It's tiring to make just one dish every day."

Kicking a pebble with her tiptoe, Celica dropped her shoulders and gave a faint sigh.

Currently, Nine wasn't in Ishana. According to what she been told when she received Nirvana, her older sister would be more and more busy starting September or something. She would also have to leave the island for a few days.

It wasn't just Nine. It was also true for Trinity, Jubei, Valkenhayn, Hakumen, and Terumi. Even if she was in the Mage's Guild, Celica didn't know the specifics

of what they were doing as she was just a mere student. But it seemed they spent day after day being busy and in a hurry.

Taking a look at the school bag she held in her hand, Celica took another breath.

She wondered if it was okay to leisurely commute to the academy and study at a time like this.

Unlike other students, she recognized the true state of affairs although only half of it. Because of that, she had been thinking about it far too much.

As Nine and the teachers at the academy had said, the students should keep practicing every day and prepare themselves so they wouldn't get outdone by the Mage's Guild's magicians when the crucial time comes... or some kind of important duty like that.

(Well, it's expected. I'm only a burden to Onee-chan now. I have to study hard so I can stop being a burden to her as soon as possible.)

What she was telling herself had also become a routine for the past few days. After all, she wasn't fully satisfied with just saying it. Her real motive was that if there was something she could do, then she wanted to do it as soon as she could.

"For now, I guess I've got a while to relax and tidy the house before Onee-chan returns."

"Right?" said Celica to Nirvana. She responded by moving her chin and staring at Celica.

Looking at her expression, Celica laughed a little.

The streets in Ishana were cobbled stone pavements. When she walked home, she would normally take the main street heading from the academy towards the port. Then, after a little while she would turn down a side street, taking a little detour past a quiet park.

Since she had to do the shopping today, instead she stayed on the main street. Celica was lost in thought while waiting to cross at a junction. Then, it happened.

"Celica A. Mercury. I wonder if I can have a bit of your time."

She recognised the refreshing voice of the man which called to her from behind.

Celica turned to look for him. What she saw was a pair, a man and a woman. The man looked like some kind of a noble due to his graceful manner, and the woman of slender body wore a dress that was wide open at the chest. There were large triangular hats atop their heads.

"Ah, Seven-san, Eight-san. Good day."

She immediately recalled Nine's dangerous mood when she met them in August. But Celica greeted them with a smile.

Nine would not be amused if she were here.

Eight stared in wonder, as if puzzled by something. Her long, curled eyelashes batted quickly.

"It's surprising how pleasant you are. Are you really Nine's sister?"

"Yes, of course... What do you mean by that?"

As she pondered on the meaning of the question, Celica reflexively looked down at her own body. It was the first thing that came to mind if when searching for the reason why her relation to her sister was in question.

"Could it be that she's surprised that Nine's sister's breasts are smaller than hers...?"

Just as she was thinking about it, a noise broke her from her musing. Celica looked up.

Still standing with both hands on her hips, flashing a smile, Eight's eyes twitched.

"...But it seems like you do have a similar tendency to upset me."

It was a taboo to talk about Eight's proportion.

Celica instinctively put her hands over her mouth.

Interrupting with a cough, Seven spoke in a calm tone of voice.

"...Would it be all right to begin our talk?"

Behind the thin metal framed glasses, his calm ice blue eyes stared at Celica and Eight who were facing each other. As his manner was like a teacher from the academy, Celica retracted her chin, straightened her back, and brushed it off with a laugh.

"Ah, y-yes. Go on."

After she urged him, Celica let out an 'ah' as she suddenly realized.

"But Onee-chan's not here this time though...?"

"It's alright if she's not here. Our business only concerns you."

Having regained her composure, Eight teasingly winked at Celica while entangling a wisp of hair that had spilled from under her hat onto her shoulder.

It was Seven who took the initiative to raise the main issue. Putting a real serious face, he adjusted his glasses with his index finger.

"I will ask bluntly. Cooperate with our research."

"Research..."

Muttering, Celica stole a glance at Nirvana.

Nirvana was standing behind Celica.

She remembered what Nine had said the day she met Nirvana. Celica spoke in a more quiet voice.

"That's what Onee-chan has been opposing, right? ...She said I'll lose my life if I cooperate."

But she wondered if such dangerous research was really being performed in a place like Ishana. Moreover, by the hands of Nine's fellow Sages.

Seven looked baffled and vigorously shook his head.

"Perish the thought that you will die. Nine has had quite the misunderstanding. Our research only requires a bit of magical power and the unique healing ability you have. Generally, an unusual disposition of magical power, like yours, is needed."

"Is... that so? Then..."

"Perhaps Nine so strongly doesn't want you to be involved in this research that she felt she must make an exaggerated lie. She really is a difficult woman."

"Good grief", said Seven, placing one pale finger on his brow.

To brush the comment aside, Eight leaned forward.

"What we're making is a powerful weapon to defeat the Black Beast that we know is going to revive one day. If we can engineer it, then surely... no, we definitely can win against it. We can fight without the need for things like Armagus."

Her thick lips, which were painted in bright red lipstick, delivered a passionate speech so fast that it was dizzying. Her large eyes burned with passion. It was unthinkable that she was the same as the lighthearted person who had raised an eye over talk about bust sizes before.

The same passion dwelled even in Seven's calm gaze as it rested on her.

"Understood? If our project is realized, we won't have to recruit a large number of people to create Armagus weapons for the war. Hence, your cooperation is necessary."

Just what was the 'research' Seven and Eight had spoken of? Celica could only have a faint guess.

A weapon to defeat the Black Beast. It must be amazing. If it existed, large numbers of soldiers wouldn't have to participate in the war. If it would truly become like that, then it was no great wonder.

The speech was something she would quickly agree with. But something still stuck in her.

"If it's that amazing... then why does Onee-chan oppose it?"

Celica spoke the one question that came to her mind.

Immediately, Eight frowned and made a troubled look while answering.

"Your magical power is required to control it. Maybe she doesn't want you to get involved with a weapon that will become a tool for war."

Putting her gloved hand to her cheek, Eight gave an anxious look as she took a breath.

Celica looked downward. She didn't have confidence in her quick thinking. But still, she pondered as hard as she could.

Certainly, Nine wouldn't allow Celica to get involved with war and weapons. Even if Celica was doing her fair share of cooking now, Nine was so prone to worry that she had made an uproar about the kitchen being too dangerous and had been making meals for them both by herself for the first two years that they had lived alone.

However.

"...I'm sorry. I can't cooperate after all."

At the end of her pondering, Celica frantically shook her ponytail from side to side.

On high heels that were so tall that Celica would fall down in three steps if she were to wear them, Eight approached her.

Still, she was interrupted as Nirvana put her arms between them.

Eight's face showed her frustration.

"Why!? It could all be completed if you participate!"

"Eight, settle down."

From behind, Seven reprimanded Eight who was shouting in rage. But it was hard to say that Seven looked calm.

"Please tell us, Celica-san. Do you have any discontent toward our explanation?"

The vigor in his gentle voice felt much heavier than Eight's angry roar.

But without hesitation, Celica looked straight at Seven and Eight, glaring down at her.

"It's not that I have any discontent. It's just because I've promised that I'll believe in my sister."

Nine had promised that she would show Celica that she could defeat the

Black Beast. Then in order for her promise to be realized, Celica couldn't afford to doubt Nine. Celica believed it not with logic, but with her intuition.

"Besides, sure, Onee-chan's worrying about me too much. However, she's real smart. If the research were something amazing that could defeat the Black Beast without any sacrifice like Seven-san and Eight-san said, then I think Onee-chan would take the initiative to use it instead."

If her magical power was needed, then there was no doubt that Celica would give it her all to prevent any additional burden placed on her sister.

Above all, the matter of cooperating in Seven and Eight's research had reminded her of something. Before, there was a time when Celica was about to give her life in order to entrap the Black Beast.

Now, Celica couldn't do the same as she did before. After all, her life had been saved by a person who was precious to her back then.

"That's why, I can't cooperate. I'm sorry!"

After carefully straightening her back again, Celica bowed deeply.

Then with the same strength as when she bowed, Celica raised her head and started to run. Nirvana followed closely behind her.

"Hey, wait!"

Shaking off Eight's pursuing plea, Celica headed toward Ishana's main street.

While running, Celica looked up at Nirvana who was silhouetted against the setting sun.

Nine was amazing. She made such a delicate bodyguard all by herself, even while she was first in line to fight the Black Beast.

Perhaps Celica herself had missed the chance to forge the same strength as her sister. If she had cooperated with Seven and Eight, she might have been able reduce Nine's hardships.

But Celica believed that Nine surely must have given Nirvana to her in case a situation like this arose. Celica's decision surely wasn't a mistake. Probably.

Nirvana turned her face to match Celica's gaze. When her eyes met the

automaton's beautiful glass replicas, Celica laughed in embarrassment. It was like Nirvana was her other sister.

"Ahaha, it's nothing. What should we have for tonight's dinner?"

"For the time being, let's go to the bakery. We should buy breads for tonight and tomorrow morning."

The western sky began to swallow the sinking sun. Before anyone realized, the sky that had been painted in orange changed into blazing flames.

Soon, the ominous sunset would burn shadows onto the pitch black stone pavements. The lined buildings, roadside trees, and the Sages who were seeing off the escaping girl were counted equally amongst the sinister shadows.

"Aaah~, and there she goes..."

Rocking a large earring with her finger, Eight intentionally made a discouraged face.

Glancing sideways at her, Seven took a step back and turned to look elsewhere. What he saw beyond the thin lens of his glasses was a thin alleyway. From the dense shadow that was born from the evening sun, several figures indicated their presences without exposing their faces.

As the figures checked the surroundings, they asked Seven a question.

The tip of Seven's lips moved only slightly as he answered.

"Yes, that's the girl in question. Her name is Celica A. Mercury."

"You're aware, right? She's mentioned in Professor Ayatsuki's reports."

While putting the finger that had been messing with the earring to her mouth, Eight made a charming smile. Her eyes didn't match the ones she wore when her blunt proposal was refused; instead they were shining in curiosity.

A single figure dropped its voice as if in doubt. It sounded like the figure was finding fault in the two people.

Picking up on it, Seven sharply narrowed his brilliant eyes.

"Be at ease. We will handle her accordingly whether she refuses or accepts. Of course, you will somehow collaborate with us, won't you?"

Being fearlessly pressured by Seven, some kind of opening was born between the human figures.

Eight put both hands on her hips and threw a glance to where Celica had gone.

"We have one chance. In that moment, the required control system and data will all gather. When that happens, it will completely be ours."

Eight's passionate words fully fueled the expectations of those who lurked in the shadow. The words that served as encouragement and a reminder got several replies.

Seven adjusted his glasses using a finger.

"Both of us will prepare the required arrangements. All of you should be careful to make no mistakes. Proceed without fail."

"Take care... the people of *Orbis Librarius Norma*."

After receiving heated gazes from both Seven and Eight, the people known only by the name of their organization left two or three words of salute before quickly vanishing into the shadows.

The sun sank further in the west. As the twilight sky burned an even deeper shade of red, the shadows gradually grew denser and longer as they were etched on the ground.

As if putting on a shadow, Eight waved her long mantle and turned her back from the alley where the figures had vanished. As she folded her arms beneath chest, she brought her cheek to rest on her mantle's fur trim.

"I was worried about what had to be done there for a moment, but looks like everything will work out in the end. It's fortunate that we have a personal connection to *Orbis Librarius Norma*."

"Fortunate, huh."

As if pouring cold water over Eight's good mood, Seven simply dropped a sigh.

His voice was quiet, but Eight could hear how nervous he was. She furrowed the eyebrows that had been so carefully groomed.

"What's wrong? I know that you want to say it was all thanks to that man. It's good that we listened to his story."

"I wonder. I have no faith in that man. Once a traitor, always a traitor. You need to pay attention, too."

"Is that so? Thanks for the warning."

Seven's scolding clearly didn't amuse her at all, Eight waved her hand over her shoulder. Her high heels, supporting her slender legs could be heard striking the pavements, long after she had left her field of view.

"Hmph, what a detestable man."

After she was sure that she was out of earshot, Eight spat out those words. As if trampling the words as they fell to her feet, her feet began to move faster.

Similarly, while gazing at the retreating figure of his extravagant associate as she headed toward the Mages' Guild, Seven muttered to himself.

"...What a loud-mouthed woman."

The sun sank into the western sky.

The color of the sky that looked burning ran after its master and rushed to the west. As the city of Ishana gradually began to insinuate the presence of the night, Seven also began to walk towards the Mages' Guild.

# BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Chapter 4

## Chapter 4: Indigo Heart, the Conception

### Part 1

Where might the proof that one is oneself be?

Where might the significance that one is oneself be?

This is the memory of a man who bears the name *Hakumen*.

The memory of when he began this new life as himself.

And the memory of when he chose his fate to fight—.

—An old castle nestled in eternal night. The residence of an old vampire who had lived a thousand years.

Jin was there, deep underground.

Although there was nothing but endless night there, the place had a darkened basement in addition. No light was supposed to flow in; only that from the flame inside the lamps which were furnishing the wall. The light from the lamps

flickered, warmly shining down on the place eerily.

Between the wavering lights, an old-fashioned wooden door stood still, giving off a dignified air. It looked so heavy as to be immovable with the strength of one man. If he wasn't underground, it would be easy to imagine that a castle's scenery awaited beyond the door. Being indoors, it seemed rather out of place.

Sitting in his wheelchair, Jin looked up at the door.

The last time, he had woken up to the presence of the castle's master, Clavis, before fainting again. Apparently a few days had passed since then. Most of the paralyzing injuries on his body had healed poorly, but it was enough to enable him to sit up on the bed.

Nonetheless, it was impossible to stand on his own. Wearing easily removable sleep-wear, his appearance was unsightly as he was covered in bandages. He was forced to move around in a wheelchair due to his injuries.

Valkenhayn had pushed Jin's wheelchair to this place.

The master of the castle, whom Valkenhayn usually accompanied, Clavis, sat in front of Jin. The old vampire was unable to walk. He moved his own wheelchair with magic.

Standing close to Clavis was Rachel. When the light from the lamps flickered, its color was reflected on the young girl's silhouette. It highlighted her unusual charm.

"All right... We have arrived."

Stopping before the door, Clavis smiled wearily, as if tired from the long journey up to here.

The closed door had been subjected to strict seals.

It had a weathered feel to it, it looked rather like it had been crafted from rock. Clavis held out one wrinkled hand to the surface of the steadfast door.

In response, bluish-white magic circles rose to surface. With a few words, Clavis incited the magic circle to recognize its visitors. After that, a bleak light slowly encircled the hand he held out, to examine it. Before long, it dissolved and vanished.

After a short pause, the door opened by itself without needing to examine anyone else's hands.

"Ugh..."

For a moment, Jin felt a numbness as if a lightning was running across his skin. A side effect of the door's seal.

The locking seal had not been broken, it was unlocked by its key: its master.

Despite that, he still felt unsettled by the residual power of the engraved seal.

*There is something I want to show you.*

Having said that, Clavis led Jin inside.

Jin frowned as he wondered what could possibly need so strict a seal. The discomfort from passing through the door only served to compound that foreboding feeling.

Clavis moved his wheelchair forward with Jin, pushed by Valkenhayn, in tow and Rachel following on foot.

A strange darkness clung to the edges of the door.

In Rachel's tiny hand was held a lamp, similar to those that illuminated the castle. The flickering magical light inside the glass shone with an intensity that did not at all reflect its size as it illuminated the surroundings. Other than the doorframe's eerie shadow, it lit the hallway which stretched far ahead inside.

They slipped into a strange and mysterious space, their surroundings no longer reminiscent of a castle. Other than the path straight ahead, everything was completely drowned in black.

As Clavis advanced, the door behind them closed by itself. As it swung shut, the large door made no sound, as if all noise was being absorbed by the surrounding darkness.

Not just the noise, but the flow of air and time also seemed to stand still.

Clearly, this realm was out of the ordinary.

Clavis proceeded without hesitation, followed by Rachel and Valkenhayn. They must have already known where this place was, its purpose, and what was

inside.

Jin felt rather uncomfortable, as the only clueless member here, with no opportunity to ask questions and no ability to halt his own procession down the soundless hall.

"By the way, Sir Jin."

Clavis spoke gently from up ahead.

Glancing back at Jin, the withered face was mellowed by an affection that didn't suit this dark, gloomy place.

"Has your memory recovered at all yet? It seems you have calmed a little."

No sound came from the wheelchair's movement. Despite that, the unheeded voice sounded strange.

Jin took a glance at his soundlessly moving chair before opening his mouth.

"...Your information regarding this world contradicts my memories."

"How so?"

The strained, cracking voice urged him to continue.

"In my memories... the Black Beast was been killed in the distant past. It was a key event in history. The ones who defeated Black Beast were the Six Heroes... As for who they were..."

Jin frowned again. The memories were still murky. He should have known more about them than just that the Six Heroes existed.

But he couldn't remember.

"Is there anything else you can remember?"

Clavis' voice sounded muffled in Jin's ears. The concentration gave him a dull headache, but Jin managed to pick words from his memory, as if tearing fragments of them from cloth.

"...Ragna. My... brother..."

Clavis turned his head slightly, to face Jin.

Jin had dropped his sight while prying through his memories, the small

gesture was lost on him.

"And then..."

Inside the hazy memories, there was a face that emerged vividly in Jin's mind. It was awfully nostalgic, and truly warm... but somehow weighed heavy on his heart.

"...Tsubaki."

The moment he spoke the name, an intense headache struck. The pain was like a hot steel had pierced his skull. Jin grimaced, holding back a gasp of pain.

He was struck by a wave of emotions, most of them unpleasant. A mixture of drowning sorrow and burning hatred.

His powerless hands creaked as they formed into tight fists..

Why? How? Rejection, a feeling of helplessness, wrath, fury. Fragments of emotion and unanswerable questions came one by one and burned his brain.

Then, a voice cut straight through his fog of painful memory. A soft and modest voice, it pulled the hot iron from Jin's skull. It suppressed and eliminated the headache that was causing his body to tremble.

"Please, calm down."

Jin raised his eyes. The pain had withdrawn, but a dizziness, born from the headache made his head spin.

Exhausted, Jin sank back into the wheelchair. Clavis squinted as if sympathizing with him.

"More time will be necessary to regain all of your memories. ...It is alright, you certainly will remember. Therefore, you should not tire yourself searching for memories."

Jin rewarded the friendly tone of voice with sharp glare. Sweet words seemed obnoxious to him. Words that somewhat made light of his feelings did not amuse him.

Realizing he had stopped moving, Clavis slowly began to move his wheelchair again.

In the long pathway that was illuminated by the light Rachel held, there were many more seals to take care of. These magic circles weren't on doors, like the first had been, but rather floating in the air, slowing their progress.

While quietly unsealing them one by one, Clavis spoke again.

"I am certain that you came from the future and were washed down the timestream into this age. ...The *manipulated future*."

"Manipulated future...?"

The feeling of dizziness remained. It wasn't helping Jin to make any sense of this new information.

Clavis' thin shoulders dropped along with a sigh.

"It is an old story. Long before the repeating, barren history of the world... Before the Black Beast materialized. Humanity had come into contact with the Boundary for the first time."

Again, Clavis' hand undid a seal.

Coupled with his narrative tone, it seemed as though the old vampire was unraveling a history which he had been seen with his own eyes.

Proceeding past the now unlocked seal, the group continued moving.

"The world gained a will by the hands of man. In accordance with its will, the world has determined the path on which humanity should tread. There are some disparities, but with the same base state, humanity will repeatedly pursue the same process and be led to the same fate."

"The future... has been determined...?"

"Perhaps it is easier to comprehend when put in that manner."

Gently and slowly, Clavis spoke as if picturing a distant scenery. Although the crimson pair of eyes had deep foresight, they were also brimming with swaying emotions rather than simply being two calm pools of serenity.

"...Let me give you an example, young man. Your coming from some other future, and arriving in our era was also one of the procedure which has been determined by the world."

"Tsk, DON'T MESS WITH ME!!"

Yelling, Jin hit the wheelchair's handrail with his fist.

"To hell with the world's will! Screw determined procedures! Then my brother... Tsubaki... ARE YOU TELLING ME THEY WILL FALL TO *THAT FATE*!?"

Filled with vigor, Jin flared at Clavis and tried to push himself out of the chair. But his weak and injured body wouldn't support his weight.

Even so, Jin violently squirmed as if trying to shake off something. Valkenhayn had to pull him back to keep him in his wheelchair.

"Be quiet! Surely you realize that your body is too damaged to move! Be aware of your own situation, kid."

"Ugh..."

The strength left his body and pain and dizziness suddenly came rushing to fill the void its exit had left. He was unable to move again, but Jin's shoulders rose and fell with his ragged breathing. He glared at Clavis.

Paying no mind to Jin's outburst, Clavis' wheelchair continued forward.

Rachel gave Jin a cold stare. In contrast, Clavis' gaze remained warm.

"...It seems you are filled with sorrow."

"I don't know... I can't remember why! But... but..."

Ragna and Tsubaki. A while ago, those names didn't mean anything to him, sunk deep inside the mist of his memory. When his subconscious raised them to the surface for a moment, a whirl of emotions followed.

He couldn't remember even a fragment of the specifics as to what he had gone through with them. Despite that, he felt an awful sorrow, frustration, and agony. His eyes, grown weak and tired, now burned hot with emotion.

Clavis turned to look forward once more; he slowly closed his eyes as if deep in contemplation.

"This world is like a dream seen by god. God has seen the same dream many times over. Its story is a repeating cycle of life and death... The *dream of fate*."

While listening to Clavis' story, Rachel held the lamp up high. The end of the

passage could be seen in the distance; a simple wooden door, surrounded by a magical seal.

"I do not know if you are able to put an end to that dream. Unfortunately, I cannot see through this world's future..."

Clavis' wheelchair drew closer to the door. His bony hand's touch caused the magic circle to fluctuate and ripple. After a few patterns had been drawn on the surface, it gently vanished.

Within the dark room that had muted all sound except voices, the creaking from the wooden door broke the eery silence.

As if stepping aside, the door opened. Another darkness awaited on the other side. But this time, it was quickly revealed that this was a small room.

Valkenhayn wheeled Jin to the entrance of the room.

In the center of the room, something stood alone. Something white. A silhouette.

"What is this...?" Jin inquired, peering at the front of the white frame.

Clavis didn't enter, stopping his wheelchair beside the door. As his red eyes gazed into the room, he sluggishly opened his mouth.

"...It is something humanity attained by chance when they discovered the Boundary in the past. Do you know of the objects named Original Units?"

"Original Unit..."

With a voice that was practically a sigh, Jin murmured.

It was very likely that this wasn't the first time he had spoken those words. He felt a tug at the corner of his memory, but the knowledge slipped from his grasp. He couldn't remember.

"To put it in simple, human terms, perhaps... they are the three gods who created this world."

Even without voicing a reply, Clavis could guess Jin's thoughts by his face. Clavis looked troubled as he continued to speak in a wheeze. Leaning back in his wheelchair, he linked his thin fingers atop his stomach.

"There are three Original Units, the Sankishin. The Master Unit Amaterasu, the Tsukuyomi Unit and this one here is the Susano'o Unit. ...Though, it has nothing inside. It is simply a vessel."

Although he said 'simply', even Jin could easily see that this was far from common sense. Clavis' speech was erratic, and yet his extraordinarily old voice was appropriate; importance and truth could be sensed from it.

Even without a word or presence, the still object was clad in an odd sense of intimidation. It exuded power.

"It has passed through many hands since its discovery. However, I am its owner now. ...Young man. If you believe it to be necessary, then I will hand it over to you."

Even though his gentle voice made it seem like he was telling a fairy-tale, Jin was bewildered. He looked back at the old vampire.

Clavis calmly looked at Jin. As if picking up the thought in Jin's heart; looking at it while carrying affection.

"...Your body is no longer functioning as it should be. If that still does not matter to you, you are welcome to remain in this castle until the day your life meets its end. But if you need legs to stand and an arm to wield a sword... I believe that vessel is appropriate for you."

Jin stared at Clavis again as he spoke. He was looking for the real motive hidden inside that pair of deep crimson eyes. Still, no matter how doubtful he was, there was nothing but honest warmth.

Clavis took a single deep breath. There was a hint in his sigh that he had grown weary.

"...There is still time. Do consider it. You must decide your own future."

"Even if it follows the plot of this god's dream you're talking about...?"

Jin's words held a hint of sarcasm.

Clavis smiled pleasantly. The wrinkles on his face grew deeper.

"What a high spirited young man. However, you are right indeed. You have to choose. No matter how much of it is part of the world's wish, the limit to keep

on choosing is none other than your own decision."

While speaking, Clavis moved his wheelchair past Jin and out of the room.

"Well... It seems I have become a little tired. Rachel, is it alright to leave the rest to you?"

"Yes. Please have a good rest, dear Father."

Her eyes, once cold were now bright with faint warmth.

Clavis gave Valkenhayn a look. Understanding what was meant by it, Valkenhayn moved behind Clavis and gently began to push the wheelchair.

Before he left, Clavis stopped his wheelchair for a moment to give Jin a final piece of advice.

"Young man. Please, live true to your own heart."

The old voice held a deep affection.

Clavis looked back at Jin with a worried, strained smile.

"...Once, I said something similar to someone who was very much like you, but... Oh dear, it seems I am not able to remember who the person was. It appears I am being reduced to a part of the repeating dream, too. It has to be my age."

After he spoke, he leaned back into the wheelchair as if sleeping. Valkenhayn walked them both back down the path and out of that place deep underground.

Rachel turned the lamp in her hand toward Jin, while Jin turned his aching body toward The Susano'o Unit.

Rather than worried, the young man's face looked more determined. Rachel interrupted his concentration, her voice chiming out like a ringing bell.

"...By accepting and uniting with the Original Unit, you will cease to be human. There won't be a second chance to return."

"What will I be if it not human?"

Jin whispered like he was asking himself.

Rachel's charming and lovely eyes slowly blinked.

"Who knows. Perhaps you won't become anything. At the very least, you won't be like you are presently."

His current self.

Jin looked at himself, sitting on a wheelchair.

His powerless self. He was no doubt alive, but his body was so impaired that he couldn't do anything by himself. It didn't amount to anything if it couldn't wield a sword to fight.

Where might the proof that one is oneself be?

Where might the significance that one is oneself be?

Jin questioned himself. Those were vague questions, but he arrived at the necessary answer quite easily.

It was natural. It was because Jin already found his resolve long ago.

"I am me. I don't need anything beyond that."

There were only two options.

Live unable to fight, or live to fight.

Only two choices came into his mind. The thought of choosing either of them pierced sharp and deep into his heart like a blade of ice. Cold pain was running through his mind.



The black silhouette he saw inside flames. The Black Beast. Both were something that had to be killed.

The man he called brother. The young girl with the name of a flower. Both were people he had lost repeatedly within the repeating dream.

He must fight.

If the Black Beast was here, then he would follow the wish of his instinct to kill it.

If he wanted to sever the repeating tragedy, then he would follow the protest of his sentimentality to decapitate it.

He could hear a voice from the standing white silhouette.

—*Be the white void. Be the cold steel. Be the just sword. Take blade in hand to reap the sins of this world and cleanse it in the fires of destruction.*

The immovable arm moved. He ended the life of the man named *Jin*, and chose to tread a new stage.

## Part 2

Time had passed quickly. Only a four months remained before the black beast would awaken.

A large scale encampment had been set up half a month away from the last day of 2107 AD. They were carrying a plan to ambush the Black Beast as soon as it awoke from its one year sleep.

For that reason, a meeting was being held in the council room in the Mage's Guild of Ishana.

The participants were the warriors who would play a central part in the strategy. Jubei, Valkenhayn, Trinity, Terumi, Hakumen, and Nine.

They were surrounding a floating orb in the center of the room. The orb had unfolded a map which they were staring at with grave looks on their faces.

"As revealed by the previous data, it was certain that the Black Beast made its appearance from the vicinity of Cauldrons. Before that happened, those Cauldron had been discharging intense levels of seithr. In short, there's high possibility that The Black Beast will appear near the Cauldron which is leaking the most seithr."

Nine, acting as the commander, nimbly waved her finger. Then, a great number of tiny lights appeared on the map, functioning as markers.

"We have a specific approximation regarding the location of Cauldrons around the world thanks to Terumi. We've been observing whether there's a change in the influx of seithr from any cauldrons among this data. And here they are."

Several green markers were now glowing red. Their numbers roughly amounted close to twenty.

She had already received and understood the information, but Trinity's face grew dark.

"It's everywhere... We have to start deploying the armies quickly. Besides, even if they arrive before its appearance, I'm not sure if they can make it stay in one place..."

"There's another nature in The Black Beast's appearance. The thing's drawn to life force. It'll sniff out the most abundant and splendid life force and hunt it."

Although he looked unmotivated, Terumi spoke while wiping the map with his hand. Around half of the red markers turned blue. The blue lights were concentrated in Eastern Europe.

"Taking that in mind, the monster will appear from the Cauldrons around here. ...Though, they're not locations that can be easily visited anyway."

Having said that, Terumi chuckled.

Valkenhayn knitted his brows. Jubei shifted his attention as if to calm Valkenhayn. Like usual, Hakumen didn't move nor talk.

Celica was watching the meeting intently, sat on a chair placed alongside the wall of the council room.

She just sat there with nothing to do. Next to her was Nirvana, her long arms dangling.

Celica didn't have any part in the plan. She was here because Nine insisted she not be left alone for even one second.

She wasn't being overprotective. Nine was being cautious in relation to Seven and Eight's proposed plan.

Around a month ago, Nine had left Ishana, but got a report from her confidants that Seven and Eight had taken the opportunity to approach Celica again.

Celica thought they had probably had given up after that occasion, but it seemed Nine was still suspicious of their actions. Nine's excuse was that it would be problematic if they made another pass at Celica in this key stage of planning, so soon before the Beast's awakening.

Although she had Nirvana to protect her, Seven and Eight were Sages. Since she couldn't afford to be negligent, Nine tried to keep Celica with her while she was on the island, one way or another.

Celica felt grateful that her older sister was being protective of her. The feeling alone was very valuable.

But as it was, she had been made to attend this meeting where she was just aimlessly sitting around, unable to do anything. Unnecessary thoughts popped up in her head as a result.

For example, there was an overwhelming difference between her and the six people she shared the room with. She was often seen with them, but she was self-conscious that she wasn't on the same ground as them.

It didn't come out of boredom nor from doing something useless.

But a bit. Just for a bit.

"....."

Celica raised her head, noticing that silence had fallen over the room.

It seemed she had unwarily been leaning on Nirvana's arm. Nirvana, who was standing at her side, looked down at Celica.

"Ah, sorry."

In as quiet a voice as possible so as not to disturb the meeting, Celica apologised to the large doll. Celica straightened her back.

Nirvana's large hand lightly hit her on the head. The gesture was intended to be more a caress than a scold and it warmed Celica's heart.

(Come to think of it, I used to get this feeling before...)

From that person. From Ragna.

She was surprised to realise that soon it would be one year since their parting. She suddenly realised how much she missed him.

If Ragna were here, she would be able to tell him how she was feeling. And then he would say something. No matter what she told him, he would say 'idiot' and then laugh.

"...It's okay. Thank you, Nirvana."

Both human and doll had a similar personality, both sharing a special kindness. While thinking about it, Celica gripped the hand of her affectionate guardian. The hand was cold. The hand was big. Currently, the hand felt reliable.

After once again explaining that she was fine, Celica turned to the meeting. Straightening herself, she made sure to listen diligently.

It was because her sister and the others were about to begin the discussion of their important fight.

After stealing a quick glance at Celica, Nine once again manipulated the blue markers on the table and changed five of them to white. They were the spot where the location of several cauldrons were comparatively concentrated.

Without hesitation, Trinity relayed detailed information about the spots that

had been turned white.

"We could probably get a more definitive specification if the proximities were closer; but considering the required time, we can no longer postpone to notify more countries to deploy their armies. Our discussion this time will be to estimate which is the most likely place where The Black Beast will appear."

"Are ya gonna deploy the armies to all of these points? Even if they all gather at the wrong point, there's a lot of distance between the cauldrons."

Jubei wrinkled his nose.

"I know," nodded Nine.

"That's why as soon as we confirm its appearance, we're going to be forced to move a large number of units. It's preferable to teleport each of them, but I can't use teleportation magic strong enough to transport troops. Therefore... can I ask that of you, Valkenhayn?"

With a sigh, Nine folded her arms below her chest and shifted her focus to the grimacing wolf-man.

Valkenhayn frowned deeply.

"Are you requesting Rachel-sama's assistance?"

"Her teleportation is able to transfer whole squads of personnel. If the scattered parties can be teleported to the place where The Black Beast appears..."

"I refuse."

Interrupting Nine's words, a clear, bell-like voice shook the room. At the same time, a faint scent of rose bloomed and a small figure appeared near Celica.

It was so sudden that Celica jumped out of her chair and grabbed Nirvana's arms. Nirvana quickly put herself on guard.

Her black dress was decorated with frills. Her beautiful golden hair was tied into two long tails by big ribbons. Her eyes were a deep crimson colour and her skin was pale as snow. The vampire who lived in a castle surrounded by an endless night, Rachel Alucard.

From the start, her appearance here made Celica's eyes open wide. Rachel had just displayed the teleportation magic that was presently being discussed.

But Ishana was concealed in a secure barrier. Furthermore, the Mage's Guild's council room had a further protective barrier applied. It shouldn't have been possible to directly teleport into this place.

"A-Amazing..." Celica couldn't help but let slip her respect at seeing the Mage Guild's strongest enchantments bested.

It was as one would expect of teleportation magic capable of moving an army as Nine had asserted.

Rachel turned to look at Celica and pointedly looked down her nose at her, as if in contempt.

"Good day. You're very skilled, managing to sit in a chair like that, without dislocating your back."

"Ahaha... You surprised me! Hello, Rachel-san."

Celica replied with a wry smile. Rachel snorted as if in discontent.

"Rachel-sama! Why are you here...!?"

Breaking the circle, Valkenhayn came over in a panic.

Raising her eyes to look first at her butler, Rachel then shifted her gaze to looked towards Nine.

"Why, to give advice, since all of you were so serious about that amusing joke of borrowing my power at the start of humanity's upcoming battle. Discard the absurd idea of involving me, Nine of the Ten Sages."

Rachel spoke in a tone of mockery mixed with the kind of astonishment one would display at a child's imprudence.

Trying not to lose her composure at Rachel's haughty tone but still clearly wanting to say something, Nine scowled. Turning to face the child-like vampire, Nine stood over the girl and looked down at her.

"The year is almost up and the Black Beast will come alive ashortly. You must be aware of this, Rachel Alucard. If the damage from that monster spreads any

further, humanity will likely lose their will to fight. At the very least, this strategy will give us the strength to fight. Considering this, our first battle has to bear fruits."

"That's why you're asking for my help? And where are your manners? I'd prefer if you made your request while rubbing your head on the ground."

"Hey... I told you to try to understand the situation, didn't I? Or are you telling me that humanity's life and death are just some game for the daughter of the Alucard Family? You have a lot of screws loose."

If those blood red eyes were sneering and looking down on her, then she in turn would rain down contempt from the shade of her purple hat. Their mutual incompatibility formed an intertwining force of opposition.

But Rachel, who was raising her eyes to look at Nine, chose to drop her gaze without any further resistance.

Celica noticed something when looking at Rachel's face from the side. Rachel usually put on a cold look. But for moment, she saw a glimpse of sorrow.

"...Even if you were to ask while standing on your hands, I will not lend my hand in this battle. No, perhaps you won't understand unless I tell you directly that I cannot help."

"Rachel-sama..."

Other than Valkenhayn, perhaps no one in this place could guess the reason why Rachel wore such a cloudy expression.

Celica couldn't understand the meaning behind that look. Bewildered, she could only blink.

To press her further, Nine instantly frowned hard. When she did that, Rachel continued in scornful voice.

"I am not able to intervene in humanity's decisions. So please, win this fight all by yourselves."

Her manner of speaking made it sound as though Rachel had been continuously watching over hundreds of years of history... Yes, it was like the other vampire who lived no less than a thousand years, Clavis Alucard, was

talking to them with his transcendental presence.

In addition to that, Celica had briefly seen sorrow and gloom on her face.

A heavy脚步声 echoed through the chamber, everybody turned toward the noise.

Hakumen, who until now had been silent, displaying no concern with the meeting, turned toward Rachel.

"...I did not expect any assistance from the likes of you, even before you showed your face."

"Sir Hakumen. I will not forgive any mockery toward Rachel-sama. Even if it comes from you."

Nine's previous words had already made Valkenhayn's face turn grim. It was now smoldering with the flames of resentment.

Jubei stepped in front of him, trying to keep the quarrel from developing further.

Rachel wearily took a breath. Then with a manner of walking that resembled a waltz, she turned to Celica.

"I cannot give my support. However, I can give you advice. The Black Beast will certainly appear before her. Perhaps it is not advice... but a prediction."

Her red eyes locked onto Celica as they blinked frantically.

Nine snapped and looked at Celica.

Trinity, Jubei, and Valkenhayn turned to look at her as well. Terumi and Hakumen were the only exceptions.

While blankly looking back at the staring, deep crimson eyes, Celica pointed at herself, unable to comprehend why.

"W-Why me?"

Again, a sad look passed over in Rachel's red eyes. Her tiny lips gently whispered but those words blew through Celica's chest with the force of sudden gust.

"...His soul is sleeping within the Black Beast."

Who did she mean by 'his'?

Celica was reminded of someone's face in that moment.

Despite their differing agendas, everyone understood who he was.

## Part 3

That night.

Celica took a shower after finishing dinner with her sister at home. Beginning her night-time routine, Celica went upstairs to her room and changed into her pajamas.

She was sitting on top of her bed, which was positioned beside the window. She squeezed a pillow between her legs and let down her hair.

Nirvana was sitting on top of a sofa beside the bed. The sofa was something Celica had prepared to become Nirvana's default position when she was in the room. Nowadays, she was completely attached to it.

She had already switched off the lights, however, she didn't feel like sleeping at all.

She knew well the reason. It hadn't left her mind. The words she heard today in the council room of the Mage's Guild.

*—His soul is sleeping within the Black Beast.*

Rachel was the head of the Alucard Family who had been watching over all of history. Celica knew that her words must hold some truth. When she had the chance to meet the previous observer, Clavis Alucard, she could see a faint sadness in his eyes and hear it as he spoke in his gentle tones. She thought that Rachel had looked similar back at the meeting.

If she dared to believe it was true...

Rachel's words gradually rekindled the ashes of a fire within Celica. Stoked by thoughts provoked by the day's meeting, that fire immediately flickered bright red, releasing heat, and burned within her chest.

As if she couldn't bear the growing heat, Celica tossed aside the pillow and got off the bed.

She ran up to the closet which stood in one corner of the room.

She opened it to reveal the outer coat and dress of the academy's uniform, as well as several sets of casual clothes, hanging neatly from its railing.

Right at the back of the closet, there was an outfit which clearly did not belong. A long, bright red coat.

The coat was too long for Celica to wear. It was apparent from the design and shoulder width that this coat was tailored for a man.

Hidden even deeper in the closet, there was a single sword with a thick and bulky blade. It was leaning against the closet's back wall.

When Celica reached in and dragged out the sword from the closet, she fell onto her bottom. The sword was heavy.

Unable to wield it at all, Celica raised her knees to hold it up in her arms and placed the broad body of the sword on her palms.

The sword was cleanly polished without any stain on it. The same was true of the red coat. At first, it had been dirty and torn in some places. Every day, she had mended it little by little until it was completely restored.

The sword and coat had been left in Celica's possession by her important friend.

"Ragna..."

Unconsciously, her lips moved and uttered *his* name.

If Rachel was telling the truth. If *his* soul was indeed sleeping within the Black Beast.

She might be able to meet him again.

She could meet him again, and then... have a conversation if possible.

She couldn't stop once she thought about it. Celica had that nature since she was little. The recklessness had often made her do things without thinking of the consequences. It must have given her sister Nine trouble.

She surely would give her more problems this time as well.

She knew. In truth, she didn't want to give Nine any more trouble nor worry. However.

"Ragna."

Calling the name out loud again made her chest even warmer and furthered her expectations.

Embracing the bulky sword, Celica's soft lips began to open. She might be able to meet him. Just thinking about it gave her a feeling like she could do anything.

If the owner of the sword could see what Celica was thinking right now, he would be frowning. He would definitely have scolded her and told not to do anything dangerous.

Nine would say the same. Putting Celica's safety first, she had even created Nirvana for her.

But it was no good. Her chest was throbbing. She could only feel a wild and impulsive happiness.

Because none of the options that were born from the possibility Rachel had hinted at would inconvenience Celica, she suddenly felt like she could do anything.

"...I've decided."

Celica looked over to the sofa while still hugging the sword.

Nirvana was sitting bolt upright on the sofa. Her unblinking eyes were staring at Celica.

Celica faced Nirvana and spoke. And as she spoke, the determination within her took a shape.

"Tomorrow, I'll speak to my sister. When the Black Beast revives, I might be able to lure it towards me."

She might get angry. At worst, she might cry. But Celica didn't think she should give up.

"If I can lure the Black Beast, I think my sister's strategy will go a lot smoother. If there's any possibility that I can do something to save somebody, then I would do anything. I'll give it my all."

She wanted to be her sister's, everyone's strength.

Above all, she hoped she would be able to see Ragna.

As her chest gently throbbed, Celica hugged Ragna's sword tightly once again.

She remembered the last time she had this kind of feeling. The warmth from his kindness.

—That night, Celica had a dream. She was standing alone in a white room. There was nothing when she looked around. Not even her own shadow.

Where might this place be?

She was thinking aloud, but even her breath was inaudible, as if the white void was absorbing all sound.

She took a step forward.

The room was so white she couldn't even tell if she was walking on solid ground. However, her feet unexpectedly found solid purchase as she moved forwards.

Then, a mirror, previously unnoticed, appeared before her unnoticed.

It was large enough to reflect Celica's entire person. Furthermore, it was not reflecting anything else around. It was as if the rectangular, full-length mirror had been prepared exclusively for her.

How could there be a mirror here? It was oddly suspicious.

She felt a vague sense of *déjà vu*, as though she had been in this dream

before.

She wondered if the mirror really existed here.

Wanting to touch it, Celica reached out towards it.

In the other side of the rectangular mirror, Celica's reflection also stretched out her hand.

When the fingers of the real and false image were about to touch, Celica was driven out of the bright white room like a fish thrown back into the sea.

The dream ended there.

When she awoke, Celica couldn't even remember a fragment of the dream.

# BlazBlue:Phase Shift 2 Chapter 5

## Chapter 5: Black Beast, Reappears

### Part 1

December 31st, 2107 AD.

A night that felt unpleasant; with a strange warm wind blowing.

Although the sky was mostly deprived of clouds, the view of the stars and moon had grown hazy as they were covered by thick seithr.

But the moon, shining dully, appeared oddly close. It shone its stagnant light upon the ground that was about to become ruined by battle, as if giving sympathy.

The surroundings were a plain wasteland; brown desert, no grass or water was present for miles.

If today would be the day of apocalypse for humanity, the scenery here surely would need no changes.

...Nine surveyed the battlefield, taking a deep breath, having confirmed the situation with all the units of the Mage's Guild.

The day and the year would end very soon. A whole year had passed since then. It was time for its revival. Just thinking about it would give anyone shivers.

Of course, the preparations had been sufficiently arranged. As everything that could be done had been dealt with, there was no anxiety or fear regarding that part.

What had been concerning Nine was Celica.

"Nine. The deployment of the foreign armies has been completed without problems."

Trinity jogged up to Nine. She was among the same units as Nine and her role was to support all of the armies.

Every functioning country was participating in this strategy.

The armies even included the countries that had previously refused to cooperate with The Mage's Guild.

Presently, several hundred thousand units had been positioned around various cauldrons that had a high rate of seithr discharge. The units also included volunteers who were ordinary people.

It was still unclear which cauldron the Black Beast would emerge from. But once its arrival had been confirmed, the attack and mobilization would commence immediately.

Among the armies that had been stationed at the cauldrons... was Celica. She had positioned herself in the centre of a group of cauldrons, so as to be as to be able to get to a number of them as quickly as possible.

"...Are you worried about Celica-san?"

Trinity asked her in a whisper as she saw a deep sorrow in Nine's expression that was masked in calmness.

Finally noticing that her mind was completely filled with Celica, Nine lightly bit her lip to reprimand herself.

"...Of course I'm worried."

She could have dodged the question, but Nine chose to speak her mind. Trinity was her companion. She could immediately see through Nine's pressure no matter how many words she used to coat it.

Plus she couldn't keep making a calm face like it was nothing when it came to that matter.

"Don't joke like that! Do you even understand what you're saying!?"

The first moment Celica said that she wanted to be a decoy, Nine had let her anger burst out, as if on reflex.

Nine's shout would make her classmates from the academy tremble. But it wasn't a big deal for Celica. Instead she retorted with an even louder voice.

"I said I do. I wouldn't say something like this as a joke."

"That makes it even worse! Celica, didn't you hear me in our preparations for this battle!?"

"Of course I remember. But this is different from our talk about Seven-san and Eight-san. I won't be dying. And if I can lure the Black Beast, won't it be good for the strategy?"

The more Nine resisted, the more that the stubborn Celica stood her ground.

No matter how many times they had this argument, Celica wouldn't back down once she had decided on something. Nine knew from experience that she was like a dog with a bone.

At that time, she could have predicted yield in the end.

"Please! I want to do it no matter what! I'll run away when it gets dangerous. I'll obey your instruction. So please...!"

The sisters continued throwing demands at each other for a further 30 minutes.

But then Celica joined her hands and kneeled in front of Nine, prostrating herself like a beggar before a king. The excessively direct request left Nine at a loss for words.

She understood about it. About what kind of a sister Celica was and how

earnest her heart was.

Nine gave a big sigh and scratched her head in annoyance.

"...Aaah, okay! You have a comeback for everything I said!"

"...Then... you get it!?"

"I get it, I get it! You're such a stubborn kid. You must have thought tons of excuses to persuade me."

Actually, even if the theories she lined up against Nine might seem all over the place, they needed a little more accuracy in pin pointing The Black Beast's arrival in order to intercept it.

There weren't many alternatives that would go smoothly even when the certainty wasn't in 100% percent, or even if they had to rely on the vampire girl's prophecy. In fact, there were only a few of them.

If the Black Beast could be drawn to Celica, then it would greatly smooth the proceeding of the plan.

Nine wouldn't have any complaints if Celica didn't do it.

"...But remember, your duty is just to lure out that monster. You absolutely cannot participate in the battle. Get to a safe place after that. You hear?"

"Yes! Thanks, Onee-chan!"

With the hard-fought battle of wills finally won, Celica's expression returned to its usual bright, carefree smile. Then she gripped her sister's hands.

Nine didn't have the slightest idea how she should feel when looking at that smile.

...The day of the decisive battle approached. Although the arrangements had been finished by this point, Nine was in violent remorse. She couldn't help but think that it might be better if she had dismissed Celica's opinion using whatever means necessary.

Nine crushed the deployment scheme of the foreign armies in her hand. She immediately switched her long gaze to the direction where Celica was supposed to be.

"Truth to be told, I want to send her to Ishana immediately. Having Celica to be a bait to lure the Black Beast is ludicrous... If I could, I wanted to at least be right beside and protect her now."

"You have to take command of the Armagus unit, you know. No one but you is able to do it."

The Armagus unit was organized from the candidates around the world that had been tested for their aptitude. Today would be their first live combat.

Even with their skill, the armies had insufficient combat experience. Commanding them required someone who grasped the understanding of Armagus better than anyone. In other word, Nine.

"I know about that."

Trinity was to give support and direct the supportive magic unit from headquarters. Jubei, Terumi, and Valkenhayn were participating in the units which were located near their respective cauldrons. Even with someone else's assistance, there was no other choice for Nine.

But it was because she precisely knew about it that the absurd irritation within the helpless situation struck her nerves.

The cause of annoyance didn't just come from the Black Beast. Seven and Eight's movement was still in her mind.

Nine thrust her disarranged long hair with her hand. Trinity put her hand to Nine's shoulder and gently smiled.

"Didn't you create Nirvana and have her beside Celica-san? And that gentleman is also there."

"...Ugh. Oh, well. I guess I don't have a problem with him being her guard at the very least, considering his war potential."

Combing the tangled hair in her hand, Nine took a deep breath to shake off the ill feeling in her chest. Though the burden in her chest hadn't disappeared,

she had to forcibly convince herself for now.

"Anyway, let's beat up the monster before it reach Celica."

"Fufu, that's the spirit~. ...But please don't do anything reckless."

"I know. You too, Trinity. I can't do anything without you after all."

"Oh my. You're making me embarrassed."

Trinity covered her girlish mouth with the fingertips that came out from the sleeve of her robe. Nine replied with a daring smile.

But time was ticking. No matter how many words she spoke, the pressuring anxiety had yet to disappear from Nine's chest.

## Part 2

The midwinter wind blew, making her cheeks lukewarm. The smell of dust was in the air.

The night had somehow grown stagnant. The stars and moon seemed so much farther away. The air, which was filled with seithr, shimmered like a pretty, thin, silk curtain. It created a sense of unease.

It had been a while since she felt the air outside the island. Celica sat down on top of a rugged hill within the endless wasteland while inhaling the dusty air of the night deep into her lungs.

Nirvana stood just next to her. The smooth and brilliant glass spheres that were her eyes appeared as if they were gazing at the distant scenery.

Following her gaze, Celica also looked into the distance.

The scenery she was staring at seemed desolate.

Once, this region had suffered damage from The Black Beast. The demon appeared suddenly as usual, transformed the buildings and road into a

wasteland, and disappeared abruptly as before.

But one small town had barely survived thanks to that whim. It was located on the other side of the rocky mountain west from here. If the Black Beast appeared in this territory tonight, the town would surely disappear and be turned into a wasteland just like here.

It was truly a dreadful thing.

Thinking about it, Celica couldn't help but think that she was a complete fool for being here.

It was like being in a dream. Sure, she was fully conscious, but some part of her mind couldn't believe the situation that was about to approach before her eyes.

Although the wind wasn't chilly, it was mysteriously cold. Sitting on top of a rock, Celica hugged her knees and placed her chin on top of them.

The dusty wind fluttered her tied hair like a sash.

Suddenly, she heard heavy footsteps behind.

Suddenly, Nirvana snapped into her combat position. Celica turned around in a panic, but seeing who was standing there softened her expression.

"Hakumen-san."

There, a tall man wearing white clothing and a white mask with long sword on his back stood silently.

There was no squadron posted near Celica. During the strategy meeting, she had emphasized the possibility that the Black Beast might not be able to find her if she was included in a unit.

Of course, Nine was opposed to it. But she was eventually outmatched by Celica's unyielding spirit once she had decided on her plan. Then she arranged for Celica to be stationed in the middle of the wasteland. Yet she would allow it only if Nirvana and Hakumen were with her.

After Celica calmly called out to her that nothing was the matter, Nirvana relaxed.

Hakumen stood beside Celica. His white mask turned toward the air as if gazing at the wasteland.

"...Are you scared?"

A low, muffled voice questioned.

Celica looked up and stared at Hakumen's face. She wasn't expecting his question. Shrugging her shoulders, she broke down her expression with a bashful smile.

"Aha... A little."

While replying, Celica was surprised by something other than Hakumen's remark. For the first time, she noticed that she was trembling a bit when she heard her own answer.

She had never expected to be so terrified. But now that she had been asked, she realised that there was a fear laying deep inside. She would compare it to the feeling a pebble would have while sinking into a vast lake

Celica drew her knees close and hugged herself tightly. She felt a bit of relief from the radiation of her own body heat.

"But I'm not so sure what could be so terrifying. Because I feel safe as much as I feel scared. For a whole year, my sister and the others have really done their best. It should be fine when the Black Beast comes."

It wasn't just Nine and Hakumen. Everyone around the world had done what they could.

There were some quarrels among fellow countries, a reorganization that had to be done to the collapsing economy, and insufficient goods. The world had to go forward while burdened by loads of problem, but plenty of people had worked hard from each of their positions. And it had finally come to today.

Celica believed that there wasn't any wasted effort through that entire year.

Still hugging her knees, Celica straightened her back and raised her face up straight. Her big eyes reflected a distant scene.

"My sister and everyone else will surely win the battle. A world where everybody lives in peace without conflict is coming. And I'm glad I can lend my

hand to achieve it. That's why right now I don't have any regrets nor a single thought to give up. But you know, it's just... "

As she thought, being in the middle of an empty wasteland alone was frightening. A terribly simple reason that made her shiver.

"...A world where everybody lives in peace. Without conflict..."

Hakumen muttered in a deep voice. It was like he was thinking of a distant wish that was vanishing. Faint and weak, swept away by the rough wind.

Hearing his voice which seemed like he was pondering on fleeting thoughts, Celica looked up and made a wry smile. When she heard Hakumen repeating her words, she became embarrassed. Because it felt like her naivety and inexperience were exposed.

"A-Ahaha. It's weird, isn't it? I got scared despite thinking about all that. It seems I'm more confused than I thought."

"...There is nothing to fear."

Hakumen looked straight forward and spoke, showing not even the slightest hesitation. Clenching the dangling hands beside his body, his feet which were previously spread shoulder-wide stepped firmly on the hard ground without a hint of retreating.

"I will slay the Dark One. Your only task is to see it with your eyes from here."

Hakumen's voice was like a single swing of sword. Unwarped, unclouded.

His standing figure reminded her of a dear feeling... Celica slowly caught her breath.

"Ragna..."

Hearing the name she had unintentionally whispered, Hakumen turned his head toward her.

When he did, Celica finally noticed that she had been muttering. She quickly waved both hands in front of her face.

"Ah, no, excuse me. You just reminded me of someone for a moment."

While speaking, Celica wondered what made her think that.

She shouldn't be recalling Ragna when she looked at Hakumen. It was understandable for it to happen once or twice, but continuing to remember somebody else's image like this was really impolite. Even if Celica was a dunse in etiquette, she could sympathize with that.

She had to be careful. While staring at Celica as she was trying to compose herself, Hakumen leisurely asked a question a moment later.

"...Do I have any resemblance to him?"

This time, Celica gasped in surprise.

She had never considered that she would be questioned about it. He usually would have averted his face without speaking a word. She thought he would stay silent, looking into the distance with his white face.

Celica nodded twice afterward.

"I'm sure I told you about this before. Last time, I was searching to find his resemblance in you... but now I can see there are clear similarities."

"Hm."

His grunt urged her to continue. She might have misunderstood it, but Celica went along with her intuition.

"He's blunt and has a bad attitude. He also tends to get into arguments with my sister. But somehow, he's good at taking care of people. And... I didn't know where he came from or anything about his history at all."

With good cheer, Celica spoke about their similarities one by one while counting on her fingers. But her hands eventually opened up and she smiled while squinting with happiness.

She pressed her hands to her chest as if a warm light had been lit inside.

"But I guess it's your air that's similar to his. When I look at you, It just makes me think about Ragna."

In no way was that a painful feeling. When she thought about Ragna it felt like being basked with sunlight filtering through the trees, back in the academy's courtyard.

"...Do you wish to meet him?"

It was a miracle for a day to come when Celica was given a question filled with such emotion from Hakumen. Still spontaneously smiling while looking for an answer, Celica lifted her eyelids and looked at Hakumen.

She didn't know where the location of his eyes and mouth were on that white, flat mask. He might not have a face in the first place. It was unclear whether Hakumen had the same 5 senses as a human.

However, Celica read the feeling in Hakumen's gaze and stared back at him.

"Yup, I want to."

Her voice rang clear and true, without any hint of hesitation or doubt.

"The reason for me acting as bait for the Black Beast is also because I thought I might be able to meet Ragna. Ah, of course I'm doing it to help my sister, too. But... when I thought about meeting him, I just couldn't help myself."

"The Dark One is still the Dark One. It appears with oblivion as its purpose. ... The *Ragna* you spoke of who is held inside of it might not necessarily be the *Ragna* you are wishing for."

His low tone of voice cut through the atmosphere without reservation.

However, instead of depressing her, his words made Celica glad.

"Aha. I've been told the same thing by Ragna in the past."

She was talking about when she found her missing father. She had been told that she might regret it if she found him.

Celica's feelings now were similar to that time.

"But I still wish to meet him."

Releasing the knees she had been hugging, Celica leaped to her feet. She stretched her back, puffed out her chest, and took a deep breath.

"I want to meet him. Talk to him. It'd be great if we could do things just like when we were together before, but... it's fine even if we couldn't. I mean, there's a lot of specific things I want to do and it makes my head spin. I want to meet Ragna. And if I do, that's enough to make me really happy."

It was strange. She should have been trembling enough to make her collapse. But now, that feeling was completely fading.

It must have been Hakumen, Celica thought. When Hakumen was there, she felt that she would get her harmony back as soon as she had an unsettling thought.

She wanted to meet Ragna. That feeling had made her push herself to stand here. She forced herself to remember it.

"...I see."

Hakumen sighed. It was no longer just a hint; his voice obviously had sensitivity in it.

Astonished, Celica stared hard at Hakumen. She couldn't help but feel that there was a gentle yet sad face of a man under the white mask.

Between his breaths, Hakumen continued to talk as if speaking to himself.

"I, too, recalled a person whenever I looked at you. Someone in the distant past who I have grown to forget."

"I look like someone you know?"

Celica asked a question to draw him in. Hakumen's past. It was like a glasswork that shouldn't be carelessly handled. It made her heart throbbed a little.

But betraying the faint feeling of expectation Celica held, Hakumen flatly shook his head.

"There is no similarity."

"Hey. Just now, I get the feeling that you're making fun of me."

"I wonder."

Even his counter of feigning ignorance was as sharp as ever.

...But Hakumen soon spoke gently.

"...It is simply because she had the same boldness as you do. A girl who would charge ahead once she saw her goal."

Hakumen was staring ahead. It was a mystery whether the white mask was looking at the dull wasteland or a dearest face of someone. Looking at his face from the side, Celica guessed the latter.

"Is that girl someone you love?"

The question was mixed with the wind.

Hakumen didn't answer. But the warm feeling that had lasted until his silence was probably not just her imagination. Pushing aside her hair which had been blown across her face by the wind, Celica smiled while scratching her ear.

"I have a feeling that you'll definitely meet her again... I just know it."

She didn't know when, where, or in what kind of situation that reunion would occur. But the encounter would surely bring happiness. Celica hoped from the bottom of her heart that such reunion would truly happen to Hakumen.

A long sigh that was clearly different than a simple one was heard coming from Hakumen.

"It is an odd conversation. You see the image of Ragna the Bloodedge in me. And I see the image of someone unforgettable in you."

Perhaps he was smiling right now. Perhaps his lack of smile was his way of smiling.

The white mask might not only have snatched his expression. When she suddenly thought about that, Celica let a small chuckle. Hakumen couldn't show it easily but every word he spoke was trying to display his smile.

Led by the sound of Celica's laugh, Hakumen took a step forward.

His long, silver hair swayed.

"Celica A. Mercury. If it is true that you see the image of that man in me, then I will bear the image itself as many times as it takes. He has protected you. Then I shall protect you at once."

"Protect me? I'm happy but... It's somehow strange hearing you say it so formally. What's wrong?"

Searching for the hidden meaning in his words, Celica tilted her head to the

side. She tried to take a peek at his face, but she was hindered by the silver hair which was blown by the wind.

Though, there was no expression that could be seen even if she saw his face.

"...I am someone who is seeing an image within you, too. I wield my sword for that foolish purpose. I shall not repeat the same mistake. Hence, I must protect you for that very reason."

It was like the voice that went across her back was hardened by a firm determination. After taking a short pause, Hakumen slightly looked over his shoulder to his back.

"Cease your curiosity. This is no concern of yours."

It was not spoken in such a manner as to push her aside. But what was being grasped tightly by Hakumen's hands must be something precious to him.

Celica decided to respect the privacy of Hakumen's thoughts and stop probing.

It was enough for her since the words Hakumen spoke had made her happy, whatever his circumstances might be.

"Hakumen, you're a kind person. Just as I thought."

"Alrighty," said Celica as she hopped to Hakumen's side. She gazed at the horizon and smiled.

Hakumen kept quiet as though his talkative nature had all been an illusion. He lifted his chin and looked into the distance.

The gesture made it look like he was getting emotional, but perhaps he was just turning his face away. When she looked at him, Celica made a mischievous face.

"Hmm? Perhaps you're getting embarrassed?"

She leaned towards Hakumen, moving her face close to his but his white mask remained silent without even a slight movement.

"It's hard to imagine, but he might be getting embarrassed for real", Celica thought. The childish emotion within Celica's mind was growing. She was

thinking whether she should push him a little more. But that thought only lasted for a moment.

Celica realised that Hakumen's appearance was suddenly making her uneasy. Perhaps she had subconsciously noticed a change in circumstance in his blank face.

"Hakumen, what's wrong?"

He didn't move even when addressed. Hakumen continued to face forward while holding his breath.

Just as she had thought, the situation was strange.

As if enshrouded with thick heat, the air around Hakumen changed.

Killing intent.

The dangerous sensation made Celica, who was still inexperienced in combat, freeze on the spot and stop breathing.

At the same time, Celica had a thought. What kind of opponent could make Hakumen express so much killing intent?

A strong breeze blew in from their front. Celica turned around to brush off the wind. Even that small movement felt sluggish and she found it really hard to move.

Suddenly, a thick fog sprouted out like a geyser in front of Celica's eyes. Celica screamed a little and sprang backwards. Moving to her side, Nirvana scooped Celica into her arms and quickly stepped back out of the range of immediate danger.

The gushing mist from the ground multiplied to two and then three bursts. As if aiming for a specific location, the eruptions drew a dotted line across the terrain.

It was heading in the direction that Celica and Hakumen were staring at. Toward the barren and uncovered wasteland.

After the small geysers had burst forth, completely surrounding that area, followed by a vast amount of black mist that began to overflow from the ground. A tremor violently shook the ground as if something was pushing up

against it.

Cracks erupted across the dry earth as a dark form emerged, tearing the previously unbroken wasteland in two.

"MOVE!"

Hakumen shouted the order.

But Celica couldn't separate her eyes from the scene. It wasn't just the scenery that she couldn't escape from, none of her senses could run from the crawling she felt in her skin.

It was the same as that time. The atmosphere she had felt just before she parted with Ragna one year ago.

The wind, thick with seithr, advanced and surrounded Celica's whole body. The earthquake was so violent that she lost her footing and stumbled.

Nirvana supported Celica as she was staggering.

Celica raised her face upward while trying to oppose the devastating wind.

Toward something enormous which tore the cracked earth and raised the ground level.

It was as black as solidified darkness, had many red veins running along its figure, and had a head the shape of serpent's. Its immense size was beyond words.

Slowly, one by one, more heads crept from the depths of the earth. Each one matching the mammoth size of the first.

A total of eight necks dragged themselves from within the crater. Following them, a large torso, which surpassed even the size of the heads, appeared on the desolated ground.

Meanwhile with the Armagus unit near the operations base, Nine was struggling for breath. She stared at the creature which had appeared with

hostility floating in her eyes.

"This is... the real deal..."

It was more than just the thick seithr that set her breathing out of control.

She mustered her willpower, in order to calm herself down.

At the main unit, Trinity fell to her knees. Her entire legs felt weak. Soon, she wasn't able to stand anymore.

Her brain couldn't accept what her eyes were seeing. It felt like the insides of her skull were firing off warnings as they couldn't comprehend anything. ...She could only stare wide eyed with a blank expression on her face.

At the assault unit leading various demi-humans, pioneered by beastkins, was Jubei. His body was resisting him as he desperately tried to reject the fear that was gripping his mind. It has begun, he thought. At the same time, he felt it was strangely close to the end of things.

Once, there had been a time when he was near to it. That moment was also dreadful. He was unable to move and his feet had frozen.

But that fear was even bigger now that he saw the beast at its full potential.

Meanwhile at the largest assault unit, Valkenhayn averted his eyes from the figure that had appeared from the ground. It was like he had witnessed the world's demise itself.

Once he had the courage to bear it within his field of vision again, while whispering the name of the lord he had sworn his loyalty to, he encouraged himself to move.

However, his body was already frozen in fright.

At Ishana's magician unit, Terumi looked up at the silhouette whose frame was now blocking out the horizon. He laughed. Laughter escaped from the

man's mouth, but not due to joy, it was because he couldn't think of any better response.

He softly muttered under his hood.

"This guy's nasty... He's even bigger than the last time..."

The Black Beast.

It was simply an overwhelming fear.

Who could have imagined it?

The dark red nightmare was squirming right there.

## Part 3

The Black Beast roared loudly. Its paralyzing howls combined into one and would inspire terror instinctively within any animal.

The destructive voice was enough to shake the ground. It was giving off vibes of despair to the world.

The black mass went beyond normal human comprehension. The shadow monster. The Black Beast.

Its eight heads were raised and the ominous red eyes were lit up. It moved around like it was searching for something.

Red lines marking its veins were running over its entire body. It looked almost like the wiring of an electrical device. The veins were pulsing light as if they were beating. It went beyond fear as to being repulsive.

The eight heads roamed about until they made a discovery all at once. A young girl standing alone in the wasteland... Celica.

Its red eyes were glaring as if some kind of emotion was crossing his features.

However, the color was nothing but sinister. The sensation was far from any emotion a human could have.

Her eyes met the Black Beast's. Celica wasn't able to tear her gaze away from its many heads.

Her body was frozen in place from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. With her gaze frozen in place, Celica was at her wit's end as she trembled in fear.

(This is... the Black Beast...)

Her throat was stuck. Her scream strangled and unable to escape.

She was afraid. It was different from the vague fear she had a while ago as it made Celica wither in pain.

The eight crooked necks bent like whips as they moved. Befitting its large size, the black giant moved ahead in grandiose manner.

Several steps more and the eight snakes would reach Celica. She might get eaten. Or else, she might get crushed. Either way, that moment would be the end for her.

Although that thought permeated her mind, there was nothing she could do to move from that point. She could only tremble and stood there, petrified, unable to do anything, like a baby...

(...But Ragna...)

For an instant, the precious color of an cut through her other terrified thoughts.

It was clear green. A warm and gentle color of green, like a tree in summer, full with leaves. But probably because of his wound, only the left side of his eyes was fine. He was always astonished, angry, and laughing with only one half of his eyes.

A transparent wind blew through Celica's chest. Her panic disappeared like it had all been a lie.

(Ragna... faced this alone.)

Thanks to it, Celica hadn't lost her life.

Humanity obtained one year of time that to her felt both short and long.

And Ragna had not yet come back.

—*mise.*

The words she heard exactly one year ago were echoing in her ears.

"...na."

As if the feeling was pushing her back, Celica took a step forward.

—*Yeah, I promise.*

Yes, he promised.

Ragna had promised to return. To take back the red coat he had entrusted to Celica.

Celica had held onto it, awaiting for Ragna to return... She promised.

Then if Ragna was somewhere inside the black mass in front of her eyes...

(I want to meet him—*—!*)

One foot fell in front of the other. Celica ran toward the Black Beast. While running, she shouted with all her breath.

"RAGNA—*—————!*"

The next moment.

A swift, silver light flew and tore the sky. It cut apart the head of the approaching black snake in a flash.



"...!?"

Celica stopped moving, startled.

It threw its whole body towards the black giant without any hesitation.

For an instant, that figure was overlapped by a nostalgic silhouette.

(No, that's wrong. It's not Ragna.)

It was Hakumen.

After he landed on top of the cleaved snake head, Hakumen flipped his sword and without any unnecessary movement pierced the crown of the head, drawing a vertical line.

The head took almost all of the long blade, and then it violently struggled. But before it did, Hakumen pulled out the sword and leaped away. Next, he gave another slash to the neck part.

The sharp noise from the slash was vividly audible. It sliced the part under the jaw in a straight line.

Nonetheless, there was a drastic size difference between Black Beast and Hakumen.

Even the eye-snatching white gleam of the long sword was unable to completely chop through the demon's neck. Perhaps the wounds of the squirming neck had healed since it calmly began to brush Hakumen away.

Still not paying any heed to its counterattack, Hakumen jumped high and didn't hesitate to swing the sword.

The strokes of the sword were many and the blows cuts deep.

While keeping the monster's jaw, that had received blows to keep it in check with his brute strength, he slashed it from the bottom up.

Jumping up to follow his cut, he rose up below the jaw and stabbed the sword to the monster's throat. Then allowed gravity to assist his cut as he slip down the long neck to the ground.

The beast shrieked dreadfully in rage.

Hakumen's was knocked away and he hit the ground hard. The impact dented

the earth. But before the soaring cloud of dust had a chance to settle, the white warrior was already standing up.

Highlighting the gallant figure of Hakumen against the battlefield, white lightning was cast about as if falling like rain.

It was the Armagus unit led by Nine.

There were numerous lightning bolts as the spell was cast repeatedly. Explosions of electricity were punctuated by a thunderous roar that matched the intensity of the Black Beast's howl.

Subsequently, Jubei's unit approached with great speed from behind the Black Beast. Their target was its feet. The alchemical weapons that Trinity had provided helped to trip the giant's feet and obstruct its movement.

Various offensive magics were fired off from the magician unit who had positioned themselves to surround the beast. The military forces from the assorted nations also commenced their attack simultaneously.

Celica watched on from the mountainside as the battlefield became intense in a blink of an eye.

It was a ghastly spectacle.

It couldn't be more obvious that it was a struggle in which humanity had concentrated all of the power they had at their disposal.

The Armagus squad's attacks were proving to be the most effective.

The number of armagus wielders that had been assembled spanned several times the number of Ishana's inhabitants. The average offensive ability from the Armagus couldn't be compared with that of the smaller magicians' unit.

Because Nine was giving commands to the armagus squad, the raining spears of the Armagus's light weren't fired wildly. The combined force of the lightning worked to stagger the Black Beast as it struck at its ankles.

It was effective. The faltering steps of the beast made it feel like humanity was drawing a victory for the first time.

...But when the hands that were used to attack repeatedly stopped for a moment, the Black Beast cried out with its ferocious voice and swung its eight

necks.

When the long necks brushed off the sky, the thick fog roared and gouged the earth like a whip. Along with a howl, the descending mass of seithr crushed the earth and living beings like a lump of iron.

Then after stopping one moment, it resumed its advance. This time it slid on the ground, imposingly moving forward.

It was aiming for Celica.

"It's coming to my location...?"

The distance was no longer mattered. The seithr would blow around violently whenever the Black Beast was near. The following rampage of wind toyed with her hair and mantle annoyingly.

Even while squinting her eyes to protect from from the head wind, Celica couldn't take off her eyes from the approaching black mass that was causing the quake.

It wasn't because she was terrified. She was searching for a presence inside this dreadful and grotesque figure of a giant.

Celica had a thought. The monster kept walking in Celica's direction even while withstanding the fierce attack. There might be a part within it that remembered the promise to 'return'.

A foolishly optimistic thought that be laughable to anyone else if they had heard it. But once she gave it a thought, Celica couldn't stop feeling like it was the truth.

"I must go!"

At this short distance, Celica could reach the beast with a short sprint. Steeling her resolve, Celica dashed off over the ocher soil. ...However, someone suddenly caught her arm.

"Wha... Nirvana?"

When she turned to look, Nirvana, who had been standing motionlessly beside Celica, used her large, weaponized hand to grab Celica's wrist.

The beautiful artificial eyes were staring at Celica silently.

She had judged that it would be dangerous for Celica to go any further. Celica struggled, shaking her arm to loosen Nirvana's hand, but she was undaunted and continued her tough restraint.

"Let me go, Nirvana! I want to go there. I might be able to meet Ragna. So ple..."

Her desperate objection was cut midway.

Under Celica's feet, veins of light were appearing.

As if in the middle of drawing a pattern, it crawled along the ground at a great speed, the pattern becoming more complex every moment.

She didn't know its purpose, but Celica soon realized what the light was drawing.

It spread wide with Celica on its center. Furthermore, it pulled along small magic circles as if they were connected somewhere, making a strange shape.

"Trinity, what is that magic circle!?"

After she entrusted the Armagus unit to another person, Nine teleported to the headquarters. While yelling, she walked at quick pace to her friend who was wearing yellow robe.

The location of the headquarters was a little higher than other places. Trinity who had been watching over the battlefield got in a panic from Nine's voice. After she lifted her face, she shook her head with complicated face.

"I don't know. I was just looking at the user now."

"Where?"

"Somewhere around the dispatched magicians who are on Celica-san's left and right sides. There's a chant of unusual spell... Found it! There!"

Trinity probed for the stream of magic power while manipulating her hearing. She pointed at the magician unit gathered within the shade of a few rock within the wasteland. Simultaneously, Nine amplified her vision.

With her telescopic eyes, Nine saw a pair of magicians she recognized well.

"Seven, Eight...!"

Crushing her anger, Nine groaned.

Beside her, Trinity's voice screamed.

"NINE, PLEASE LOOK AT THAT!"

At the same time of the shrieking voice, Nine turned her sight back to normal.

What had burst in to her regular sight was a drawing of huge magic circle like a geoglyph that appeared behind Celica.

A magic circle unknown to Nine. But it was easy to decipher by looking at the magic circles that had been used as foundation, the objects that were added, and its gigantic size.

But it was something that gave Nine a tremendously bad feeling.

"Summoning magic? ...It can't be!"

Faster than the transformation of her surprise to anger, the expanded magic circle on the ground began to emit a sinister light.

The large magic circle that appeared all of a sudden began to shine. After realizing it, Celica was shaking in confusion while looking behind.

"Huh? W-What's this!?"

Even the magic circle below her feet began to glow after a bit of delay.

She couldn't understand what was happening. Celica tried to get away from that place.

But for some reason, she wasn't able to go outside the magic circle. It was like she got imprisoned within a cylinder glass bottle.

She hit the invisible wall with both hands. There was no sound, but the sensation blocked Celica from getting out.

(What should I do... I somehow got a very bad feeling...)

As if confirming that ominous hunch, a lukewarm chill brushed against Celica's spine.

To shake it off, Nirvana stretched her arms and hugged Celica tightly. Both of the hard, inhuman arms covered Celica to protect her from everything.

At the same time outside of Celica's sight, Nirvana's back opened. Something like a rod was pushing up and went toward the empty sky. The object that looked like an antenna and lighting rod engraved a violet crest. It wore light as if acting in agreement with something.

"Nirvana..."

Question and relief. With a voice mixed with both, Celica whispered to Nirvana.

Before her sigh ended, an unusual phenomenon happened.

The light from the magic circle suspiciously started to flicker strongly. After the noise and shock diminished like they were sinking furiously, it tried to drag Celica from everything else and knock her down.

"Wh... what's going on... Why's this happening..."

Still getting taken to the bottom of the ground by the force, Celica desperately clung to Nirvana and endured it.

But soon, the circulating chill stroke her spine and went inside her skin. The cold touch of ice snatched strength from Celica's whole body.

Body heat, sensation, emotion. Everything that dwelled within her warmth was seized, frozen, and unfolded.

(No...)

She put strength into the arm that was clinging to Nirvana. But all of that strength were turning to liquid, making it meaningless.

Celica's knees crumbled, light enough to make the illusion of noise.

Her consciousness became distant like it was absorbed.

(No... if I faint... I can't meet... Ragna...)

The hand that was supposed to grab Nirvana slipped and dangled beside her

body. While she was relying on the neck that couldn't support her head, her sight went around and couldn't see anything but the night sky.

(Ragna...)

She wondered if this was what dying felt like. With her back still could only feel the stiff hands of Nirvana who was supporting her... Celica lost her consciousness as if she went sleeping.

—Celica didn't know what happened afterward.

Delivering what had been extracted from Celica, the extended magic circle connected its light to the main part of the magic circle which was lying in wait behind.

The gigantic magic square that appeared on the sloppy ruin of hill received it. It was gushing out a light that had the color of flame. The light was spreading to the jet black figure within the circle.

The figure immediately grew large and began to crawl out from the circle.

Its huge arms were stretched before placing both hands on the wasteland. Then it pulled its body like it was crawling out of a swamp.

It had a really vague depiction of a man's features. It had one head, two arms, one torso, and two feet.

Its whole body was black like it was built by molding solidified darkness. Like it was split by cracks, the skin had some kind of blood vessels that were like red veins circulating as they pleased.

Its appearance... resembled the Black Beast.

The titan that appeared from the magic circle made deep noises and waved its long arms. It moved its clutched fists forward to grasp the Black Beast, which had been confined by the Armagus attack, from the side. With unbelievable strength, it knocked off the beast's large build.

Making a violent roar that shook the earth, the Black Beast forcefully gained a distance.

Everyone was watching over that scene in blank.

It was no longer a battle of humanity. It was the clash between absurdity with absurdity, monster with monster.

When the black titan's stance changed to crawling on all fours on the ground, it widely opened its mouth with compulsory movement like a machine.

A white magic circle was unfolded within the mouth cavity that had transformed into a black cave. The magic circle rotated like the gears of a watch that had gone awry. It made the red veins that covered the titan's body to swell slowly.

The next moment.

A straight, white flash was fired from the black titan toward the Black Beast.

The ear-piercing roar and shriek robbed the owners of their sense of hearing to hear all noises for several seconds. The powerfully strong light burnt every shadow, fading their sense of sight.

But everyone heard and saw it.

The sound when the beam fired by the titan penetrated the Black Beast's abdomen, and its condition.

As the spear of light vanished, the world regained its colors and sounds. Then the black titan once again submerged into the swamp of magic circle as if it had accomplished its duty.

What remained afterward was the Black Beast. But the gaping hole in its body didn't get healed.

The light which the titan had fired even burnt and wiped the seithr around the Black Beast. The Black Beast would cease to exist if there were no seithr.

The snake demon that was the embodiment of nightmare roared to the distant moon with a shriek. Then its large build trembled once.

And like a bag stuffed with sand that was released at once, its form crumbled. While still crumbling, it ran away to underground.

The rasping noise was getting absorbed by the earth.

The vast amount of black was getting swallowed.

Then without taking a long time, the Black Beast vanished from that place.

...After its gigantic body was gone, the remaining scenery could be seen clearly.

Toward the location where the Black Beast was, the ground was greatly demolished in a straight line. The beam which the titan had fired had burnt it.

The tall cliff that existed above the titan and beast lost its contour as if scooped by spoon like ice cream. A part had transformed into a gentle plain.

It was a tremendous power.

That abnormal strength had repelled an abnormal apparition.

It was the very first moment for humanity to succeed in repelling the Black Beast.

No one knew where it had originated from, but the desolated battlefield was engulfed in cheers.

It seemed like the cheers within the wasteland was done to celebrate posterity and the act of god as it went across the deep traces of the attack. The soldiers who shouted their joy were competing to assemble at the disfigured terrain.

It was like they had witnessed the act of god. At any rate, it repelled the Black Beast with a blow. Toward the monster that couldn't be stopped for an instant even if they had concentrated their own energy.

But that wasn't the case for Nine.

"CELICA!!"

Making a sorrowful voice that split her throat, Nine ran at the top of the hill that bad footing.

Nine usually didn't think of them as obstructing, but she had thrown away the high heels and Ten Sages hat somewhere. Getting covered with cloud of dust, she stumbled and came into a stop.

Nirvana was standing there. She was holding Celica on her arms.

Her tawny hair was completely disarrayed. Her head was supported by the chest of the feeble Nirvana while her limbs were stretched out like a puppet that was snapped of its thread and broke its joints.

Even the fingertip that she would took out to immediately meddle in everything, the cheeks that usually dyed in slight pink, the lips that fit her lovely smile. All was so pale it would make anyone shuddered.

Nine's hands tucked in her sister's cheeks. Then as if to support them, she pressed her own forehead to Celica's forehead. The forehead she touched was cold.

"Nine, how's Celica-sa... n...!?"

Trinity who was running late pinned her bursting chest and asked a question while still breathing roughly. Before she finished her question, Jubei who had arrived just before muttered with a sharp voice.

"She's okay, ain't she?"

Nine's shoulders slightly trembled. But there was no tear flowing. When Nine raised her face, she brushed off bits of dirt on Celica's cheeks with her fingers while replying with the kind of voice like she had crushed her emotions.

"She just fainted. It was thanks to Nirvana who was beside her. ...But her magic power got sucked out, so she won't wake up for a while."

"The Black Beast's... dead yet?"

"No. It was only running away. It seems the strength of the finishing blow was

lacking."

While calmly answering another question from Jubei, Nine untangled Celica's bangs with her fingers.

Hakumen walked with undisturbed pace and stopped at a separated place. His emotionless face stared at Celica and Nirvana.

Valkenhayn, who was among the largest army of the allied countries, joined them with the appearance of wolf that he wouldn't normally expose. Still in that appearance, he bared his fangs and groaned a question.

"Nine. Tell us if you know about it. What on earth was that?"

"...Artificial Causality Weapon."

Nine spoke quietly. After letting go of her hands from Celica who looked more like a doll than Nirvana, she used the hand to tightly grip the chest part of her own clothes.

Looking over Nirvana's shoulder, Nine glared at the location where the titan had appeared. Her pupils were shaking in fury. Directing her burning gaze to the wasteland that was presently empty, Nine squeezed her stomach and continued to speak.



"That was Nox Nyctores... Gigant: Takemikazuchi. ...Something I created."

Exactly at that time, he stood alone at a separated location.

The excited crowd were cheering while swarming the scar from the overwhelming destruction that had carved the earth. Looking over from the position where he could see them, his long coat was fluttered by the dry wind. Putting both hands to the pockets, a glint in his eyes was shining dully under the hood he wore low over his eyes.

"Khukuku... Nice, real nice. You're really some extraordinary geniuses..."

He laughed, shaking his thin shoulders.

"Thanks to you, looks like I might get what I want faster than expected... Guess I have to give a gratitude, HYAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!"

The joyful voice that didn't reach anyone's voice silently thickened the color of darkness.